

The right road

The future of the European centre-right

Bartek Staniszewski, Dr William Prescott,
Joe Harrison and Ryan Shorthouse

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Executive Summary

For much of the postwar era, centre-right political parties dominated European parliaments. European centre-right parties in the time since the Second World War benefited from and presided over strong economic growth, rising living standards and relatively generous social security systems. But today they are struggling, facing challenges to their political survival and the national interest.

As Chapter One explains, despite their dominance for much of post-war history, the centre-right as a pan-European political grouping has scarcely been the object of academic study. To our knowledge, no study in the past has successfully and clearly defined the European centre-right, and so no study has been able to offer a perspective on what it is that made the European centre-right specifically successful or how this success can be repeated.

This research seeks to better define and shape the centre-right across Europe. It does so by detailing the history, principles, policies and challenges of the main political parties and traditions of the centre-right across Europe before providing a fresh policy prospectus to revitalise a popular and effective European centre-right.

We employed two main research techniques for this report. First, we conducted an extensive literature review examining relevant evidence from across Europe, and in particular from the UK, Germany, France, Ireland and Poland. This is because of the good availability of evidence for these countries and also because they represent a good geopolitical

variety. Second, we consulted with a number of academics, politicians and political commentators from across those countries.

The main research questions explored in this project are:

1. How do we define the centre-right in a European context?
2. What are the main political parties and traditions of the European centre-right?
3. What are the political history and successes of the main parties and traditions of the European centre-right?
4. What are the key principles and policies of the main parties and traditions of the European centre-right today?
5. What are the main commonalities and differences of the main parties and traditions of the European centre-right today?
6. What are the key political, economic, social and environmental challenges the main parties and traditions of the European centre-right face today?
7. What can the main parties and traditions of the European centre-right learn from one another?
8. What is a fresh policy prospectus to revitalise a popular and effective European centre-right?

Defining the European centre-right

The exact meaning of ‘centre-right’ remains elusive, Chapter Two will show. Indeed, the centre-right is often thought of as a halfway house between the political ideas of the right and of the centre-left. This approach imagines political ideologies as lying on a sort of continuum stretching from the left to the right.

The problem with a one-dimensional political continuum approach is that some ideas are characteristic of political centrism in itself rather than being just a moderation of right- and left-wing ideas.

While the right and the left are radical and sometimes revolutionary in their approach, the centre is more reformist. Moreover, the centre tends to be more focused on evidence-led thinking while the left and the

right are happier than the centre to jettison an evidence-led approach in favour of more ideological approaches, such as postmodernism for the left or popular wisdom for the populist right.

The centre, on the other hand, wishes to protect institutions from being captured by the interests of the elites, a core part of the centre's belief in pro-institutionalism. The non-centre sees institutions as the mere means to achieving their political ends, as opposed to something that is of itself valuable to a country's political framework.

Given the centre's relative preference for the maintenance of established institutions and existing political structures, and opposition to their capture by political interests, for the purposes of this report, we will define the centre in terms of three features: it is reformist, anti-revolutionary and pro-institutionalist.

This would suggest that the political continuum, rather than being a one-dimensional spectrum with only two opposite poles, has at least three opposite poles: the left, the centre and the right. Each of the left, the centre and the right can have something in common with each of the others.

By defining the centre, we can distinguish the centre-right from the non-centrist right; the centre-right is centrist, while the non-centrist right is not centrist. Indeed, all the characteristics of the political centre that we have just discussed – being in favour of reform and institutions and opposed to revolution – are also intuitively applicable to the centre-right.

The main other form of centrism, besides the centre-right, is the centre-left. They differ in three key ways.

First, the centre-right is cautious about change, but not overly so, distinguishing it both from the reactionary right, which wants to reverse changes that have already taken place; and from the centre-left, which wants to see more radical changes take place. We will refer to this first core European centre-right principle as conservatism.

Second, the centre-right values the culture and people local to it: it is notably less cosmopolitan than the centre-left. For the lack of a better

word, we will refer to this second core European centre-right principle as non-cosmopolitanism.

Finally, the centre-right believes that the best economic model is one in which the markets are largely free of government control, unlike the centre-left which favours statism. We will refer to this third core European centre-right principle as economic liberalism.

There are two tests for whether a political party or tradition is centre-right, at least insofar as Europe is concerned. First, a political party is centre-right only if it is centrist. Second, a political party is only centre-right if it subscribes to at least two of three core European centre-right principles: conservatism, non-cosmopolitanism and economic liberalism.

Note that the three core principles of the centre-right – conservatism, non-cosmopolitanism and economic liberalism – can be in tension with each other. For example, non-cosmopolitanism can manifest itself through support for protectionist trade measures, which is at odds with economic liberalism. Those trade-offs mean that no consistent policy platform can maximise all three of the European centre-right's core principles, but instead must prioritise some at the expense of others.

The centre-right in the UK

The centre-right in the UK is consistently and clearly represented chiefly by a single political outfit – the Conservative and Unionist Party – which is the world's oldest and most electorally successful democratic political party. Having assumed its modern form in the 1830s, the Conservative Party dominated British politics in the twentieth century.

This is not to say that the Conservative Party has been the only force on the centre-right of British politics. It should be stressed that it is possible to be philosophically centre-right in the UK but still be a representative, member or voter of another political party. However, as relative to other UK parties, centre-right people are more likely to be Conservative Party representatives, members or voters.

We identify five core tenets of the centre-right in the UK, which are

prevalent at different points in the postwar period, as explained in detail in Chapter Three.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is central to British Conservatism. Conservatives often claim to have no ideology. This preference also stems from a conservative scepticism about the power of human reason. Indeed, Conservatives are not inherently against all forms of change, but favour initiating more gradual, incremental change as opposed to sudden and revolutionary change. This tenet is aligned most with the European centre-right principle of conservatism.

Cautious social reform

Through its support for prioritising vulnerable people in our country via cautious social reform, this tenet reflects the European centre-right principle of non-cosmopolitanism, but also conservatism because of the incremental approach and an attempt to thwart social unrest.

Long a key tenet of modern Conservatism, the Conservative conception of social reform is distinct from that of the left. Whereas the left typically views services such as benefits payments or state-funded education as forms of wealth redistribution, Conservatives view them as a means to help individuals to help themselves and prevent social unrest.

Support for existing institutions

British Conservatives have traditionally supported existing institutions and values which include, among others, the monarchy, the established church, parliamentary government and the rule of law. Like the pragmatism tenet, this one also embodies the conservatism principle of the European centre-right.

There has been a shift in recent years, however, with Conservative attacks on institutions ranging from the civil service to the national broadcaster – the BBC – and the judiciary. This is partly because

increasing numbers of Conservatives have come to see them as either incompetent or inherently hostile to Conservative ideas.

Support for private property

Conservatives have stressed the importance of defending private property rights, which aligns with the European centre-right principles of economic liberalism and conservatism. This serves several purposes.

First, property rights act as “the natural bulwark of liberty”, as former Conservative MP and later Cabinet Minister, Quintin Hogg said, by giving property holders greater independence from, and ability to, stand up to the state. Second, defending property rights reduced the attractiveness of any revolution which might threaten individuals’ stake in society, thus supporting the principle of conservatism. Third, Conservatives believe that respect for private property is an essential driver of prosperity.

Support for a more limited state

Closely connected to support for private property, another key tenet of British Conservatism is support for a more limited state. Wherever possible, Conservatives prefer goods and services to be provided by private or third-sector organisations rather than by the state.

Conservatives believe that the state’s primary function should be the protection of individual freedom. This desire for a more limited state stems both from a fear that giving it too much power would threaten that freedom, but also from a belief that the state is inherently less efficient than the private sector. In this regard, this tenet aligns with the economic liberalism principle of the European centre-right.

Contemporary challenges to the centre-right in the UK

Rise of anti-establishment sentiment

Support for anti-establishment forces has been rising and the combined vote share for the traditional forces of centre-left and centre-right, the Labour and Conservative parties, has steadily declined since the fifties. It fell from an average of 90% of the vote at general elections between 1945 and 1970 to just 57% in 2024.

Worse, the differences between the centre-left and centre-right, as represented by the two major parties, are sometimes hard for disillusioned voters to ascertain.

Not only are anti-establishment parties in the UK winning more votes, but they are also learning how to work the electoral system to their advantage. While this represents a threat to both the centre-left and centre-right, the latter has been especially badly hit.

Growth of the populist right vote

The growth in anti-establishment sentiment has also in part led to the rise of right-wing populism, which has further divided the UK centre-right politically. For nearly a century, the relative political unity of the British centre-right through the Conservative Party compared to the British centre-left greatly aided its success.

However, the growth of the populist right, especially Nigel Farage's various political outfits (UKIP and now Reform UK), now threatens to split the right-of-centre vote.

Initially, this new populist right centred around Euroscepticism. More recently, Farage's decision to re-enter the political fray and his decision to take on the Conservatives at the 2024 election demonstrates the enduring appeal of the populist right post-Brexit.

Perceived lack of competence

Thanks to numerous policy failures under recent Conservative Party governments, the UK centre-right's reputation for competence, once a key ingredient for its success, has severely eroded.

The state of the UK after 14 years of government by the centre-right's leading vehicle, the Conservative Party, did not cast its reputation in a positive light. Annual GDP growth stood at just 1.5% between 2009 and 2023 and public debt looked set to reach 270% by the 2070s without significant policy change.

Sudden philosophical shifts under successive Conservative Prime Ministers have hardly made for consistent policymaking and failed to project any long-term vision, nor did the rapid churn of ministers – there were 16 housing ministers alone between 2010 and 2024.

Collapsing support among the young

An ageing voter base means that the British centre-right faces long-term extinction unless it can once again appeal to younger voters. According to a 2024 YouGov survey, just 8% of 18-24 and 25-29-year-olds voted Conservative in 2024.

A large part of the reason for this growing disillusionment with the centre-right relates to the increased difficulties younger voters face in acquiring assets and starting families. Soaring house prices, for example, have caused the rate of homeownership among 25-34-year-olds to plunge from 55% in 1997 to just 35% in 2017.

While individuals within the British centre-right have attempted to address some of these problems, they have made little headway due to pressure from Conservative MPs and activists.

The centre-right in France

The French right has a history of chronic division, which complicates the process of identifying a clear centre-right tradition.

The first natural focal point is the mainstream French centre-right tradition currently embodied by *Les Républicains* (LR), known as the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP) between 2002 and 2015. Although the LR has declined in recent years, the centre-right has not disappeared. In 2021, 31% of French people identified as centre-right, compared to just 19% as centre-left and 17% as centrist.

The second wing of the French centre-right comprises the nominally centrist factions which have come to the fore since 2002 and can be viewed as the liberal wing of the French centre-right. The clearest embodiment of this faction in recent years has come under the leadership of Emmanuel Macron, President since 2017. Macron founded his party *En Marche* in 2016 – rebranded as *Renaissance* (RE) in 2022.

We identify three core tenets of the centre-right in the UK, which are prevalent at different points in the postwar period, as explained in detail in Chapter Four.

Gaullist conservatism

Gaullist conservatism refers to the French centre-right's belief in a strong, stable state where the executive defends tradition and traditional values through moderate reform but can drive through bold changes where they lie in the national interest. This specifically French tenet blends elements of the European centre-right principles of conservatism and non-cosmopolitanism.

Economic liberalism

The French centre-right has represented the major driving force towards greater business freedoms, privatisation of industry, relaxing labour laws and lowering state spending, whenever these changes have occurred.

However, the adherence to economic liberalism is not universal on the French centre-right, and attitudes remain more interventionist than among the centre-rights of other European countries.

Republicanism

Republicanism refers to the French centre-right's commitment to upholding the sovereignty, unity and indivisibility of the Republic – a uniquely French idea linked to the European centre-right principle of non-cosmopolitanism. The foundational republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity are universally revered in French politics.

Contemporary challenges to the centre-right in France

The influence of the populist right

Of the French centre-right's external challenges, the most significant has been the influence of the populist, far-right party FN and, since 2018, its successor the *Rassemblement National* (RN). This political force poses much more of a challenge than the populist right does in most other western European countries.

While the French centre-right has long been split between liberal and conservative poles, these divisions have been aggravated by the socially conservative influence of the FN and RN. Indeed, the populist right's damaging influence in many ways has been even further aggravated by actions taken within the French centre-right, which has struggled amidst diverging social attitudes between the increasingly liberal middle classes and more socially conservative rural and lower-income voters.

There is also a significant economic dimension to this polarisation. Those implicated in the 'silent counter-revolution' also felt that their plight was connected to the economic consequences of globalisation, to which the centre-right remained committed.

Additionally, the French centre-right worsened its own fragmentation in imitating the populists, which has allowed the FN/RN to increasingly

attack the centre-right with the phrase “the French will always prefer the original to the copy.”

Leaders’ inability to foster unity

Another key challenge for the French centre-right is weak leadership – namely its leaders’ recurring inability to rally their various parties and factions into a single movement or around a single presidential candidate.

De Gaulle’s incoherent philosophy laid weak foundations for future leaders seeking to unite the centre-right and failed to establish clear policy positions on key topics, particularly where national sovereignty was concerned.

The years of UMP dominance between 2002 and 2012 seemingly buck this trend. However, the UMP leaders’ ultimate inability to manage different factions within their ranks left the French centre-right over-reliant on individual leaders who have failed to establish stable party structures.

Although Macron has been able to hold his movement together since 2017, there is no clear successor forthcoming at this stage. In a party so strongly associated with an individual leader, it remains deeply uncertain whether Macronism will survive after Macron.

The centre-right in Poland

The Polish centre-right is impossible to pinpoint in party political terms. Of the parties previously associated with the Polish centre-right, some have gone extinct, while others have been the subject of profound philosophical shifts, and parties now associated with the centre-right have non-centre-right foundations.

We identify three core tenets of the centre-right in the UK, which are prevalent at different points in the post-communist period, as explained in detail in Chapter Five.

Anti-communism

Removing communist influence and reforming communist institutions was perceived by multiple Polish centre-right governments as their main mission, while collaboration with communism and former communists was generally abhorred by the Polish centre-right; sometimes to the detriment of pursuing other policy goals. This tenet was especially important in the Polish centre-right's early years and stems mostly out of a non-cosmopolitan desire for sovereignty.

Religiosity

It is difficult to overstate the influence of religion, and the Catholic Church in particular, on the Polish centre-right, particularly over the course of the late twentieth century. While the extent to which explicit religiosity continues to feature in Polish centre-right rhetoric declined over the course of the twenty-first century, the relationship between Christianity – and in particular Catholicism – and the Polish centre-right remains strong. The European centre-right principle of conservatism in Poland manifests itself largely through religiosity.

Economically liberal reforms of Balcerowicz

Appointed the Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister in September 1989, former academic Leszek Balcerowicz kicked off a programme of sweeping liberalising economic reforms according to the doctrine of economic shock therapy. While controversial at the time, Balcerowicz's reforms led to unprecedented levels of economic growth since the fall of communism. The Polish centre-right has consistently defended and pursued the legacy of Balcerowicz's reforms. They are the main way in which the European centre-right principle of economic liberalism manifests itself in Poland.

Contemporary challenges to the centre-right in Poland

Political trust

Poland has the lowest social trust levels of any country in Europe – and some of the lowest in the world – with only 16% of Poles declaring that they can trust the majority of people. What is more, according to the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Index, Poland consistently ranks well below the global median for public trust in politicians.

Low political trust incentivises electoral competition based on ‘sloganism’ rather than policy; consequently, in Poland, voting for a given party can often be commensurate with an endorsement of the values that the party symbolises rather than the party’s policies. This is harmful to the centre-right which thrives on responsible governance and effective policy development but tends to eschew unrealistic and undeliverable political slogans.

Disunity

From the beginning after the end of the Soviet Union, the Polish centre-right has been plagued by division and infighting. While arrangements where two large centre-right parties take turns in government and opposition can work for the centre-right, this had not happened in Poland. Instead, it facilitated the two parties’ turn away from the Polish centre-right, hence fragmenting it. The effect of this has been a serious reduction in the centre-right’s ability to determine the Polish state’s policy direction.

Fertility

Poland registered under 19,000 births in November 2024, the worst month for the number of births in Polish history since the end of the Second World War. The Polish centre-right will be unable to promise their voters a positive vision of economic growth unless this problem is overcome. What is more, a decline in family life tantamount to a drastic

decrease in fertility threatens the future of the Polish centre-right's religious voter base.

The centre-right in Germany

The German centre-right, as represented primarily by the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), has dominated German politics since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1949. Collectively, they are known as the Union.

We identify five core tenets of the centre-right in Germany (West Germany before 1989), which are prevalent at different points in the postwar period, as explained in detail in Chapter Six.

Pragmatism

The CDU's pragmatism has remained a key element of its success. Part of this is driven by the German electoral system which necessitates the formation of coalition governments and compromises on matters of policy.

Christian democrats are both sceptical of overarching theories and hostile to utopianism. Instead, Christian democrats believe that reforms should be implemented pragmatically and cautiously. As such, the German centre-right's pragmatism aligns with one of the three European centre-right principles: conservatism.

Western internationalism

German Christian democracy has traditionally been characterised by a firm support for West German participation in the western alliance structure and western institutions more generally.

Germany's unique history meant that the centre-right pursued a more internationalist rather than a nationalist approach, making it more cosmopolitan than the centre-right in other European countries.

Non-denominational Christianity

Christianity is a core element of the CDU/CSU Union's identity, although its influence has weakened since the late sixties. Crucially, this is a non-denominational Christianity that is independent of any specific church. As well as reflecting its pragmatism, this religious tenet also manifests the European centre-right principle of conservatism.

Social conservatism

While hesitant to describe themselves as such, recognisably socially conservative ideas are critical to Christian democrat thought. To Christian democrats, the traditional family is at the centre of society and, as such, must be supported with assistance to those raising children.

More recently, Christian democracy has shifted away from some socially conservative values, as attested to by Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to permit a free vote on same-sex marriage in 2017.

Social market economy

The social market economy was characterised as a third way between classical liberalism and Marxism and is centred around a school of economics known as ordoliberalism.

Ordoliberalism believes that functioning markets are vital to guarantee the future of society and that state intervention should be limited to ensure competitive markets. While supporting welfare provision, the social market economy also stresses the importance of helping people to help themselves as opposed to encouraging them to rely on the state. It is often referred to as pro-market rather than free market.

Contemporary challenges to the German centre-right

The splintering of the political system

The German party system has significantly fragmented in recent times. Between the sixties and eighties, the two major established parties (Union and SPD) always won more than 80% of the vote at elections. At the 1976 election, they won 91%. Yet, at the 2025 elections, this fell to just 45%.

This growing political fragmentation complicates the formation of viable coalition governments and means that cross-ideological coalitions, once rare, have become the norm. If the trend continues, there is even a risk that forming coalitions will become impossible. The existence of only a single, philosophically-diverse coalition also deprives voters of choice.

Rise of the populist right

Especially concerning from a German centre-right perspective has been the rise of the populist AfD which has enjoyed representation since 2017.

While Friedrich Merz has tried to deal with the AfD in part by shifting to more non-cosmopolitan positions, especially on immigration, this has done nothing to slow the growth of the AfD, which secured a record 21% of the vote at the 2025 elections.

Alienation in former East Germany

German reunification brought pain and disruption for the former GDR. While the staggering sums spent to rehabilitate the former East Germany produced results, substantial gaps remain between it and the former FRG.

This has had direct political consequences. Since reunification, the former GDR has been a stronghold for the successor parties of the former Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED); first the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and later The Left. More recently, it has

also become a stronghold of the AfD. This has combined to hurt the CDU, which now underperforms in the former GDR relative to the former FRG.

The centre-right in Ireland

Since 1921, Irish politics has been dominated by two major centre-right parties: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Given their ambitions for broad, cross-class appeal, the term ‘centre-right’ is a label that these parties have rarely claimed for themselves. However, these parties’ socially conservative, Catholic roots and shared embrace of economic liberalism since the sixties firmly places them within the European centre-right.

We identify four core tenets of the centre-right in Ireland, which are prevalent at different points in the postwar period, as will be explained in detail in Chapter Seven.

Pragmatism

The Irish centre-right has a strong track record of maintaining political effectiveness by carefully adapting its policy prospectus over time. Beyond the simple desire to retain electability, this tenet ties into the European centre-right principle of conservatism, with both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael consistently demonstrating their willingness to undergo moderate reform in order to preserve longer-term national stability and growth.

Commitment to Irish national identity

This tenet reflects the Irish centre-right’s non-cosmopolitan commitment to maintaining a strong sense of Irish national identity. While common to most European centre-right traditions, this tenet holds a particular importance in an Irish context given the nation’s history.

Social conservatism

This tenet refers to the traditional, Catholic values that have shaped Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for much of their history. This religiosity is a form of conservatism, a key principle of the European centre-right.

Despite the traditionally conservative outlooks, both parties have shown a notable degree of flexibility in this area over the last five decades. However, this balancing act has become increasingly challenging in recent decades as the gulf between Irish conservatives and progressives widens.

Economic liberalism

This Irish centre-right's final tenet, economic liberalism, aligns with the European centre-right principle of the same name—namely the belief that the economy is best served by a market model that is largely free of government control, with consensus around this tenet having developed in Ireland since the late fifties.

Contemporary challenges for the centre-right in Ireland

Demographic change

The Irish centre-right faces the challenge of maintaining a broad electoral appeal amidst rapid demographic change. Historically, Fianna Fáil in particular benefited from a largely homogeneous, Catholic, agrarian society that enabled it to win cross-class support. However, Church attendance has dropped sharply, and referenda on same-sex marriage and abortion show that Catholicism no longer binds Irish society as before. Additionally, Ireland's foreign-born population has risen dramatically, making integration and immigration increasingly salient issues for voters. These demographic shifts risk fragmenting the centre-right's traditional support base and intensifying left-right divides over social and cultural issues.

Mitigating economic inequality

Many lower- and middle-income households did not feel the benefit from Ireland's recovery after the 2008 global financial crisis, with income inequality remaining high and hourly earnings among the most unequal in Europe. Housing affordability and homelessness have also become major concerns – especially for young people – driving voters towards left-wing parties. While state intervention and redistribution have kept disposable income inequality relatively low, this system is heavily reliant on a narrow corporate tax base, making it vulnerable to external shocks.

Ireland's leftward shift

A further challenge is the steady leftward shift in public attitudes in Ireland. The average Irish voter now identifies closer to the centre-left, with even Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael supporters showing more left-leaning views. This shift complicates the centre-right's pragmatic strategy, as attempts to follow public opinion have sometimes led them to overstep, illustrated recently by defeats in the 2024 referenda on family and gender language in the constitution. Economic policy has also become more contested, with public resistance to measures like water charges and pressure for higher spending. As a result, the centre-right risks alienating its base and struggling to define its identity in an increasingly left-leaning political landscape.

Anti-establishment sentiment

Ireland's centre-right is also threatened by the growth of anti-establishment and populist sentiment. Ireland has historically avoided the rise of a populist radical right-wing party, in part thanks to left-wing populist party Sinn Féin soaking up the anti-establishment votes. However, Sinn Féin's shift towards moderation has left space for new anti-establishment forces. Although far-right candidates performed poorly in the 2024 general election, their vote share is rising, and anti-immigrant sentiment has gained traction

– as violently illustrated in the 2023 Dublin riots. The centre-right's continued dominance is threatened by this fragmented but growing protest vote which could yet coalesce with the catalyst of a charismatic leader or major political crisis.

Challenges of the European centre-right

At the start of this report, we identify the key three principles of the European centre-right, and from these flowed particularised tenets in different European countries. For contemporary challenges, we are doing the reverse: having described the particularised contemporary challenges for the different countries, in Chapter Eight we can derive from this the leading contemporary challenges facing the modern centre-right across Europe

The ascendancy of right-wing populism

In four of the five countries studied in this report, the emergence of right-wing populism has become an increasingly major challenge for the centre-right. With the populist right growing, the centre-right is having to compete with them for voters and sometimes power.

The centre-right has attempted to deal with the problem of the populist right in two mutually exclusive ways: delegitimising it, often in cooperation with the political left; and imitating it.

The problem with attempts to delegitimise the populist right is that it aggravates the anti-establishment sentiments that populist parties' voters already often feel, hence making them less likely to support centrist parties.

The crucial problem with imitating the populist right is that it exposes a lack of consistency and vision within the centre-right's philosophy, as well as antagonises the centre-right's voters who disagree with the policies and rhetoric of the populist right.

Unclear differentiation from a left-wing alternative

In all the European countries studied in this report, another major problem since at least 1991 has been the lack of a clear threat posed by a distinct philosophical alternative on the left. Prior to 1991, the majority of European centre-rights benefited from the looming threat of communism, as represented by the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc.

Moreover, the growing economic consensus in the post-communist era, caused by the centre-left's adoption of 'third way' politics, has made it much harder for the centre-right to distinguish itself from its traditional philosophical opponents on the centre-left.

This blurring of lines in centrist politics has worsened further since 2020. After decades of the centre-left moving rightward, centre-right governments were prompted to move leftwards by the unprecedented economic context of the COVID-19 pandemic and then the Europe-wide cost-of-living crisis – triggered in part by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Since the nineties, the centre-right has tried to combat this problem of under-differentiation in two main ways: re-invoking the left-wing threat; and finding a new cultural threat against which it can rally voters.

Re-invoking the left-wing threat has proven unpopular with the public. Moreover, this tactic is largely unavailable to politicians in European countries where the threat of communism has never been serious enough to re-invoke it today.

On the new threat, centre-right parties have increasingly sought to differentiate themselves through cultural policy in two particular areas: multiculturalism and 'wokeism.'

There are two problems with this. First, not enough people are sufficiently motivated by 'woke' or multicultural issues. Second, even for those who are concerned with 'wokeism' or the failures of multiculturalism, the centre-right is not the obvious outlet for these sentiments.

Poor economic record in recent times

Across Europe, the centre-right's tarnished economic record has proven to be a major challenge to its political success in recent years. In most instances, this is due to centre-right governments underdelivering on economic growth since 2007.

The inability to deliver strong growth is a unique disadvantage for the centre-right which has traditionally attracted voters precisely on the promise of a prosperous, well-managed economy. Indeed, historically, the centre-right has consistently produced far stronger growth than its rivals.

The reasons for this recent poor economic performance of European countries are multiple, including that: European governments do too little to encourage risk and entrepreneurship; European business is too heavily regulated; overly cautious culture is present in large European institutions; European electricity prices are very high; and Europe's low productivity growth. Attempts at addressing those problems have, to date, been largely insufficient.

Demographic change

In all the European countries we selected, the centre-right is struggling with hitherto unprecedented demographic changes.

In particular, three recent demographic shifts are proving challenging for the centre-right: higher-than-ever levels of immigration; lower-than-ever fertility rates; and highest-in-decades levels of polarisation between men and women.

Immigration

Between 1990 and today, the share of the population that is foreign-born has increased in each of the European countries we studied. The pace of change has been particularly rapid in the UK and Germany, where the proportion of the foreign-born population has more than doubled in the last 35 years.

High immigration levels are often correlated with a rise in support

for populist parties. However, they also present a particular challenge for non-cosmopolitan and conservative centre-right parties, at least one of which describes all centre-right parties.

Successful examples of policies that have significantly reduced overall immigration to levels lower than what has already been seen in recent years are very scarce. Instead, policy success is easier found in changing the nature rather than quantity of a country's immigrants.

Fertility rates

Fertility rates have gone down consistently for decades in the countries we studied.

Low fertility rates are a problem for the centre-right for two reasons. First, a decline in family life that would come about from low birth rates risks a more individualistic culture; one that is antithetical to the conservative vision for the good life. Second, and more universally, low fertility rates present an economic problem. When the fertility rate is below the replacement rate, the ratio of workers to dependents begins to worsen.

Only some European countries have explicitly tried to address the fertility challenge. However, even France, which spends 3.6% of its GDP on family benefits, has been unable to prevent the birth rate from falling below replacement level.

Policies seeking to increase the fertility rate are pushing against very powerful cultural factors, most notably the growing preference among women to have fewer children. Policy must seek to address these cultural factors to have any chance of success.

Polarisation between men and women

We are currently experiencing, both across Europe and also much of the developed world, the highest-in-decades levels of political polarisation between men and women. Both German and UK women under the age of 30, for example, are over 20 percentage points more likely to support left-wing parties as compared to men.

This is a problem for the centre-right because, first, historically, the centre-right relied on women voters reliably voting for the centre-right. Second, this is also a problem for the centre-right because it is linked to the problem of family life. If women and men find it harder to form agreeable relationships, they are unable to form families, which damages conservative parties.

There have not been many overt attempts to address polarisation between men and women among European governments. Nevertheless, two broad strategies can be distinguished: moving to the left together with women; or attempting to re-integrate men and women into a shared social fabric, mirroring the assimilationist approach to integration policy.

New priorities

There are leading contemporary challenges to the European centre-right: the ascendancy of right-wing populism; unclear differentiation from a left-wing alternative; poor record on economic policy in recent times; and demographic change. But there are also major challenges across European countries that any government, centre-right or otherwise, would have to deal with. We might distinguish between these as centre-right and national challenges. The centre-right must have priorities and policies that deal with both. This is what Chapter 9 aims to do.

This Chapter offers ten priorities – with some accompanying policy suggestions – that would help both the European centre-right and each European country as a whole. Our recommended priorities and policies are deliberately broad to be applicable to different European countries. And our recommended policies are not exhaustive; instead, we highlight policy suggestions for the centre-right that could be most distinctive, effective and salient.

While the purpose of this report is to help the centre-right, we have no interest in facilitating the interests of the centre-right at the expense of the public good. While it is generally true that public interests and

the interests of the centre-right coincide, there may be circumstances where this is not true. On the contrary, all our recommended priorities and policies seek to facilitate the interests of the centre-right while also serving the public good.

Our proposed 10 priorities for the European centre-right are: country; capitalism; copiousness; competence; contribution; community; civility; care; children; and conservation.

Priority one: Country

The centre-right should foster a greater shared national identity for people to unite around in each respective country, but one that is open for new entrants. This identity must make those exposed to it feel as though they are a part of a common, co-operative scheme with every other person who subscribes to that same vision, and it must detract from a vision of ethnic nationalism bound up in immutable characteristics, such as genetic heritage.

Policy suggestions:

- A voluntary and competitive national service scheme open to all school leavers, similar to the current policy in Norway, where only 17% of school leavers do national service, but where it is a sought-after mark of prestige and a helpful boost to one's future career prospects.
- Ensure all young adults, not just migrants acquiring citizenship, participate in citizenship ceremonies to celebrate their national identity.
- European countries should co-operate on defence, including by re-affirming commitments to mutual defence pacts, to better defend each European country. No European country is strong enough to resist a serious extra-European threat alone.
- European countries should co-operate to better manage illegal immigration, including through the processing of asylum seekers in, and deportation of failed asylum seekers to, third countries.

Priority two: Capitalism

In an effort to accommodate concerns around capitalism, the European centre-right has consistently overregulated entrepreneurialism and enterprise, particularly when contrasted to the US. To address this, the centre-right must seek to reduce and simplify the regulatory burden faced by European enterprises – and entrepreneurs in particular – to make it easier for them to drive profits and innovation.

Policy suggestions:

- The weight of taxation more generally should be shifted away from work and entrepreneurship and towards those who derive income from rent-seeking on their assets.
- Tax benefits for the risk-taking of entrepreneurs should be applied much earlier in the entrepreneurial journey.
- Regulators should be mandated to produce estimates of the costs of the regulation that is introduced on enterprise.

Priority three: Copiousness

Centre-right policymaking, rather than seeking to create policy which harms and risks nothing, should focus on positive-sum thinking (even if some people get more or if risks are taken, this is good if everyone benefits), whereas the centre-left (in the case of capitalism) and the populist right (in the case of highly skilled migration) stand for zero-sum thinking (if some people get more, this is bad even if there is a net benefit).

Policy suggestions:

- Expand all forms of credible homegrown energy infrastructure, including nuclear, renewables and gas.
- Introduce ambitious housebuilding targets and deliver them through zonal planning policies where housing development in designated areas cannot be blocked by local opposition.

Priority four: Competence

Even when voters do not support centre-right philosophy, they have often recognised that centre-right governments make difficult decisions to ensure the economy grows and public services are well-managed. This reputation has, however, eroded in recent years, driven largely by the lack of a clear and consistent policy direction and internal disunity that is uncondusive to effective government. The European centre-right must reverse this trend if it is to return to success.

Policy suggestions:

- In opposition, always conduct formal and expert-led policy commissions – a process which should be mandated through the constitutions of centre-right parties – to be prepared for government on day one.
- Always have fiscal rules that seek to achieve a structural budget surplus in day-to-day spending.
- Establish expert independent bodies that always vet fiscal and monetary policy.

Priority five: Contribution

The centre-right should emphasise personal responsibility and the idea that individuals should be rewarded in proportion to their efforts to improve their own lives and those of their families and communities – as opposed to reliance on the state. This approach stands in contrast to the centre-left's focus on equalising outcomes regardless of contribution, and to the populist right's tendency to distort the fair rewarding of effort, sometimes fostering resentment when hard-working individuals from minority groups succeed.

Policy suggestions:

- Introduce supplements to working-age benefits for people with longer working histories such that those people can get better support from the welfare system if they end up needing it.

- Increase the age at which people draw down state and private pensions to incentivise older workers to work and contribute for longer.
- Introduce new time-limited taxes and volunteering requirements for new skilled migrants.

Priority six: Community

The centre-right should champion the value of community, particularly in the sense of connections based on shared values, customs and traditions, rather than immutable characteristics like ethnicity or class. By fostering communities that individuals can actively join and help shape, the centre-right distinguishes itself from both the centre-left, which often prioritises class or minority-based communities, and the populist right, which has a special interest in a community composed of the ethnic majority.

Policy suggestions:

- Schoolchildren could be mandated to do local volunteering for at least a week during one school year.
- Employees could be given a new right to take at least two extra days a year off in order to do volunteering.
- Permanent settlement or the ability to receive state benefits could be conditional on the ability to demonstrate proficiency in the local language.

Priority seven: Civility

The centre-right should prioritise the defence of civility, understood as the commitment to unwritten social norms that underpin a harmonious public environment. By upholding these cultural expectations, the centre-right can distinguish itself from both the centre-left, which often disregards such norms in the name of progress or inclusivity, and the populist right, which invokes civility rhetorically but frequently undermines it through divisive tactics in the democratic sphere.

Policy suggestions:

- Fines should increase on behaviour such as fly-tipping, littering, playing music out loud on public transport, vandalism and other anti-social behaviour.
- Similarly to being called to jury duty, between the ages of 18 and 30, all citizens should be required to take place in one two-day long deliberative democracy exercise, as deliberative democracy exercises have been shown to have long-term positive impacts on the civility of people's engagement with public debate.
- All social media algorithms should be made transparent, since social media is a major source of uncivil behaviour in the digital public space. This is because even those who start viewing more moderate content are gradually encouraged to move towards more extreme and less civil items, including political extremism, scams and pornography.

Priority eight: Care

The centre-right should uphold the principle of care – in particular for those who are unable to fully take care of themselves – primarily through families, but also with appropriate state support. This commitment to care reflects a core conservative belief in intergenerational responsibility and the binding power of love within society, setting the centre-right apart from both the populist right, where this sentiment is largely absent, and the centre-left, which sometimes deprioritises care in order to meet other goals like equality of outcome.

Policy suggestions:

- Make free early-years education compulsory from the age of three for a minimum number of hours a week.
- Increase funding for elderly social care through increasing taxes not on work but on assets, specifically income derived from housing and pensions.

Priority nine: Children

Children and family are at the centre of conservatism. The centre-right should therefore place children and family at the heart of its agenda, recognising the family as the foundational unit for transmitting tradition, virtue and social cohesion. With Europe facing unprecedented demographic decline, the centre-right must reaffirm its commitment to this principle, reclaiming this policy area which is increasingly being poached by centre-left and populist parties.

Policy suggestions:

- Benefits and tax breaks for parents in the earliest years of their children's lives should be increased, both to incentivise families to have children and to lower the financial burden on parents in the years when having children is costliest.
- Make parental rights, leave and tax breaks transferable to working grandparents.
- Incentivise or even mandate child- and family-friendly planning design, particularly in residential districts in countries where the relevant zoning laws are present. This would involve, among others, walkable, green spaces, playgrounds and lower speed limits.
- Employment law could strengthen flexible working rights, allowing parents to better balance having children with employment, and so decreasing the opportunity cost of having children.
- Ban the sale of smartphones and social media use among children under the age of 16.

Priority ten: Conservation

The centre-right should defend its commitment to conservation of the climate and natural environment, recognising the intrinsic value of natural beauty and the essential role a healthy environment plays in sustaining human life. This commitment is rooted deeply in the conservative tradition, emphasising stewardship and local attachment, and is reflected in the centre-right's strong record of reducing emissions through pragmatic, effective policymaking.

Policy suggestions:

- Prioritise increasing incentives for and investment in greener technologies to tackle climate change and biodiversity decline, above additional costs and rules for consumers and businesses.
- For countries that have adopted returns agreements with European countries, facilitating the deportation of illegal migrants, European countries should increase green finance for the development of those countries' green infrastructure.
- Commit to larger areas and stronger protections for particularly beautiful and biodiverse areas, such as national parks and marine protected areas.

Conclusion

It is time for a reboot and reunification of the centre-right across Europe, to defeat the populist right and statist centre-left. That requires distinctive priorities and effective policies – rooted in historical principles – so the centre-right can return again to be the engine of peace and prosperity across Europe. This report offers a rallying cry for centre-right Europeans to come together to win and deliver again.

Chapter One: Introduction

For much of the postwar era, centre-right political parties dominated European parliaments. The aftermath of the Second World War meant that the far-right became anathema to voters, while the proceeding Cold War acted to the disadvantage of left-wing parties, which could be seen as sympathetic to the ideology of the rival Eastern Bloc. The centre-right rested between those two extremes.

European centre-right parties in the time since the Second World War benefited from and presided over strong economic growth, rising living standards and relatively generous social security systems. For three of Europe's four largest economies, the United Kingdom, France and Italy, GDP per capita grew at an average rate of 8.3%,¹ 8.1%² and 9.1%³ respectively between 1960 and 2007.⁴ By comparison, between 1913 and 1950, per capita GDP growth across Western Europe averaged just 0.9%.⁵ In the UK, between 1945 and 2000, only one Conservative Party leader – William Hague – failed to become Prime Minister. In the

1. Macrotrends, "U.K. GDP Per Capita 1960-2024", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/GBR/united-kingdom/gdp-per-capita> (2024).

2. Macrotrends, "France GDP Per Capita 1960-2024", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/FRA/france/gdp-per-capita> (2024).

3. Macrotrends, "Italy GDP Per Capita 1960-2024", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/ITA/italy/gdp-per-capita> (2024).

4. Germany, the other of Europe's four largest economies, is excluded here due to being split into East and West Germany prior to 1989. However, GDP per capita growth in Germany averaged 4.1% between the end of German reunification in 1991 and the start of the 2007–2008 financial crisis.

5. Gianni Toniolo, "Europe's Golden Age, 1950-1973: Speculations from a Long-Run Perspective", *Economic History Review* (1998), 252-267, 253; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, "World Population Prospects: The 2024 Revision", <https://population.un.org/dataportal/data/indicators/76/locations/908/start/1990/end/2024/table/pivotbylocation> (2024).

Federal Republic of Germany, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has held the Chancellorship for 49 years as compared to its main rival, the centre-left Social Democratic Party's (SPD), which has held it for just 23 years.⁶ Meanwhile, in Italy, the Christian Democrats formed the "pivot for every national government" for more than four decades.⁷

Even after the end of the Cold War, the centre-left's good fortunes did not last long. Its success in the nineties was largely founded on a turn towards centrist pragmatism that incorporated elements of centre-right liberalism. By 2009, the centre-right was back at the forefront of European politics. Of Europe's four largest economies, the centre-right was in power in three of them, and the European People's Party (EPP) went from strength to strength in the European Parliament, holding 263 seats to the European Socialists' (PES') 163 seats.

The uniqueness of this research

Despite this impressive history, the centre-right as a pan-European political grouping has scarcely been the object of academic study, especially in comparison to particular centre-right political parties (such as the UK Conservative and Unionist Party), particular centre-right political ideologies in Europe (such as Christian democracy) and even other broad political categorisations (such as the far right).⁸

Perhaps this is because of its ideological incoherence. As opposed to Marxism or libertarianism, the European centre-right is not associated with any particular high-profile set of writings or any particular group of high-profile philosophers – such as is the case with Karl Marx and his followers for Marxism or with the likes of Friedrich Hayek, Murray Rothbard and Robert Nozick for libertarianism.⁹ Despite this, it has

6. Sarah Wiliarty, "Germany: How the Christian Democrats Manage to Adapt to the Silent Counter-Revolution", in Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Riding the populist wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 141 – 169.

7. R. Kenneth Carty, "The Government Party: Political Dominance in Democracy" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 5, 82.

8. Marija Taflaga, "The Centre-Right: Christian Democrats, Conservatives and Liberals", in Neil Carter et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Parties* (London: Routledge, 2023), 137.

9. Bas van der Vossen and Billy Christmas, "Libertarianism" in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2024).

largely presided over an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity in European history. This success is worth studying. To our knowledge, no study in the past has successfully and clearly defined the European centre-right, and so no study has been able to offer a perspective on what it is that made the European centre-right specifically successful or how this success can be repeated. This study attempts to do just that.

The focus of this research

This project seeks to better define and shape the centre-right across Europe. It does so by detailing the history, principles, policies and challenges of the main political parties and traditions of the centre-right across Europe before providing a fresh policy prospectus to revitalise a popular and effective European centre-right. This prospectus seeks to be compatible with the principles that define the European centre-right and proceeds from the evidence we gathered throughout this project – a literature review and interviews with experts across Europe – but also seeks to make recommendations that are original, impactful and realistic.

The main research questions explored in this project are:

1. How do we define the centre-right in a European context?
2. What are the main political parties and traditions of the European centre-right?
3. What are the political histories and successes of the main parties and traditions of the European centre-right?
4. What are the key principles and policies of the main parties and traditions of the European centre-right today?
5. What are the main commonalities and differences of the main parties and traditions of the European centre-right today?
6. What are the key political, economic, social and environmental challenges the main parties and traditions of the European centre-right face today?

7. What can the main parties and traditions of the European centre-right learn from one another?
8. What is a fresh policy prospectus to revitalise a popular and effective European centre-right?

We employed two main research techniques for this report. First, we conducted an extensive literature review examining relevant evidence from across Europe, and in particular from the UK, Germany, France, Ireland and Poland. This is because of the good availability of evidence for these countries and also because they represent a good geopolitical variety. Second, we consulted with a number of academics, politicians and political commentators from across those countries, as listed in Box 1.1 below.

Box 1.1. Experts consulted

- **Aidan Regan**, Professor of Political Economy at University College Dublin.
- **Aleksander Hall**, former Minister for the Polish Government.
- **Andrew Smith**, Director of Liberal Arts at Queen Mary University of London.
- **Dominik Geppert**, Professor of Modern History at the University of Potsdam.
- **Eoin O'Malley**, Associate Professor in Political Science at Dublin City University and columnist for the *Sunday Independent*.
- **Gary Murphy**, Professor of Politics at Dublin City University.
- **Günter Krings**, former Parliamentary State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry of the Interior.
- **Hugh Linehan**, Duty Editor of *the Irish Times* and Host of Inside Politics with Hugh Linehan.
- **Itay Lotem**, Senior Lecturer in French Studies at the University of Westminster.

- **The Rt Hon. the Lord Willetts**, former UK Minister for Universities and Science.
- **Mark Garnett**, Senior Lecturer at the University of Lancaster.
- **Martina Steber**, Deputy Head of the Munich Research Department of the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History and Professor of Modern History at the University of Augsburg.
- **Oliver Maksan**, Editor of *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.
- **Pat Leahy**, Political Editor of *the Irish Times*.
- **Peter Hoeres**, Professor of Modern History at the University of Würzburg.
- **Paweł Musiałek**, President of *Klub Jagielloński*.
- **Piotr Arak**, Director of the Polish Economic Institute.
- **Philip Nord**, Emeritus Rosengarten Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at Princeton University.
- **Rainbow Murray**, Professor of Politics at Queen Mary University of London.
- **Stuart Ball CBE**, Emeritus Professor of Modern British History at the University of Leicester.
- **Tim Bale**, Professor of Politics at Queen Mary University of London.
- **Wojciech Przybylski**, President of the Board of the Res Publica Foundation and Editor-in-Chief of Visegrad Insight.

This report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter Two** defines the European centre-right.
- **Chapter Three** looks at the centre-right in the United Kingdom, chiefly represented by the UK Conservative and Unionist party.
- **Chapter Four** looks at the complicated history of the centre-right in France, from Gaullism through to its modern iterations.
- **Chapter Five** looks at the splintered centre-right in the young Polish democracy.
- **Chapter Six** looks at the centre-right in Germany, spearheaded by the German Christian Democrat Union.
- **Chapter Seven** looks at the long dominance of the centre-right in the Republic of Ireland and its recent attempts to come back to the preeminence it once enjoyed.
- **Chapter Eight** summarises the leading contemporary challenges facing the European centre-right today, their sources and the solutions to them that have been attempted thus far.
- **Chapter Nine** offers new distinctive priorities and effective policies for the European centre-right to adopt to address leading centre-right and national challenges.

Chapter Two: Defining the European centre-right

Just what ‘centre-right’ means remains elusive. The English sociologist Lord Anthony Giddens argued that widely spanning political terms, such as ‘centre-right,’ are meaningless due to the variety of ways in which they are employed across different countries.¹⁰ As a consequence, many studies of the centre-right “are narrow in focus, dealing with a single thinker or a small number of closely related thinkers, usually within the context of a particular country”.¹¹

The German philosopher Jan-Werner Müller has gone so far as to argue that “[centre-right] parties have become so pragmatic over the years that it is often unclear what, other than their desire to cling to power, animates them in the first place.” It is difficult to define a political grouping that has no defining principles, besides perhaps pragmatism.¹² Müller’s view, however, is wrong. In this Chapter, we will define just what the core principles of European centre-right thought are.

An extensional definition is one that seeks to define a term by listing everything that can be described by such a term. This is the approach usually used to define the centre-right across academic literature. The English political scientist Tim Bale and the Chilean politologist Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, for example, write that the “three party families

10. Cited in Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien, *Left and Right in Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

11. David Allen, “Modern Conservatism: The Problem of Definition”, *The Review of Politics* (1981), 583.

12. Cited in Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe’s Mainstream Right in Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 2.

within the mainstream right can be distinguished in contemporary Western Europe: Christian democrats, conservatives and liberals”.¹³ The historian Marius Ostrowski, on the other hand, defines the centre-right slightly differently as “Christian democracy, market liberalism [and] liberal conservatism”,¹⁴ while the political scientists Noam Gidron and Daniel Ziblatt define the centre-right as the coalition of “market liberals, social conservatives, and populist nationalists”.¹⁵

There are two problems with such definitions. First, for an extensional definition to provide us with a good understanding of what we are defining, we would also need to define each of the things that we are listing. Second, unless we produce an intensional definition, what things we list as described by the term that we are defining is arbitrary. Only an intensional definition allows us to give a good reason for describing something in a given way. So, we now move on to provide just such a definition.

Often, the centre-right is thought of as a halfway house between the political ideas of the right – such as religious influence, civil security and tradition – and of the centre – such as parliamentary democracy, the social market economy and cultural tolerance.¹⁶ This approach imagines political ideologies as lying on a sort of continuum stretching from the left to the right, with the centre-right lying on said continuum in the position for which it is named, and therefore adopting ideas that moderate right-wing positions in a centrist direction, or adopting ideas that moderate centrist positions in a right-wing direction.

If the one-dimensional continuum approach was right, and an idea was characteristic of the left but not the right – or vice versa – we would expect the centre to adopt an idea that lies in between the ideas of the

13. Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 11.

14. Marius Ostrowski, “The Ideological Morphology of Left-Centre-Right”, *Journal of Political Ideologies* (2023), 6.

15. Noam Gidron and Daniel Ziblatt, “Center-Right Political Parties in Advanced Democracies”, *Annual Review of Political Science* (2019), 28.

16. For example Marius Ostrowski, “The Ideological Morphology of Left-Centre-Right”, *Journal of Political Ideologies* (2023), 6; Constantine Arvanitopoulos (ed.), *Reforming Europe: The Role of the Centre-Right* (Berlin; Springer, 2009), 1-6.

right and the left. In other words, for any right-wing idea R, and any left-wing idea L, we would expect the centrist idea C to be a moderation between R and L. For example, the economic centre welcomes some central economic planning, as opposed to the economic right, but the economic centre is not accepting of as much of it as the economic left – the centre's position on economics is a moderation between the positions of the left and the right. In that sense, the centre does indeed lie on a continuum between the left and the right, and so the continuum approach is vindicated to at least some extent.

The problem with a one-dimensional political continuum approach is that, intuitively, there seem to be some ideas that are characteristic of political centrism in itself rather than being just a moderation of right- and left-wing ideas. On the one-dimensional approach, if R and L are the same, then C should also be the same as R and L. However, as Ostrowski writes, while the right and the left are radical and sometimes revolutionary in their approach, the centre is more reformist. The left and the right both also tend to be more anti-establishment and anti-institutionalist than the centre.¹⁷ Moreover, the centre tends to be more focused on evidence-led thinking while the left and the right are happier than the centre to jettison an evidence-led approach in favour of more ideological approaches, such as postmodernism for the left or popular wisdom for the populist right.¹⁸ Research by the American political scientist James Fishkin found that evidence-led, rational political deliberation conducted within a randomly selected sample representative of any one political community always leads to the average views of the people in the sample becoming less radical and more centrist.¹⁹ Indeed, democracies with more established, older, trusted institutions also tend to have more self-declared centrists.²⁰

17. Marius Ostrowski, "The Ideological Morphology of Left-Centre-Right", *Journal of Political Ideologies* (2023), 9.

18. Bartek Staniszwski, "Trump: Post-Modernist?", <https://thecritic.co.uk/trump-post-modernist/> (2024); This is not to say that the centre is opposed to ideology, but the centre-right's policy positions are in response to more than only ideology.

19. James Fishkin, *Can Deliberation Cure the Ills of Democracy?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).

20. Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien, *Left and Right in Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 38.

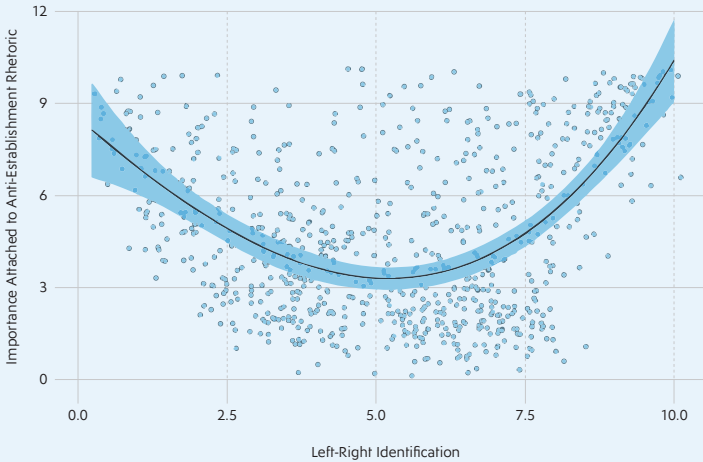
Empirical data more generally strongly supports the view that centrists think differently to those on the left or the right and are not merely compromising between the two. Chapel Hill has, since 1999 – and most recently in 2024 – regularly run a survey of political scientists across Europe. We analysed the most recent edition of this survey, as well as the collation of all the surveys that Chapel Hill has run from 1999 – which accounts for how European politics has ideologically shifted since then.²¹ In all of these surveys, the political scientists were asked to rate each party's political ideology on a scale ranging from 0, indicating 'extreme left,' to 10, indicating 'extreme right.' We then found what answers differentiate centrist parties the most from more left- and right-wing parties.

All Charts make use of a question regarding the position of the party in the year of the survey in terms of its overall ideological stance, rating it from 0, indicating the extreme left, to 10, indicating the extreme right. For all Charts, where multiple questions were used to determine a single position, all questions were weighted equally and responses averaged to produce a single value. Multiple questions were used in order to provide us with more data, to take full account of the different concepts mentioned in this Chapter and also to decrease the likelihood of linguistic confusion caused by the survey's multinational character spoiling the results. A more detailed methodology can be found in the Annex at the end of the report.

First, in three surveys across 2016, 2019 and 2024, Chapel Hill asked hundreds of political scientists across Europe about the salience of anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric among various political parties across Europe. In Chart 2.1 below, 0 on the y-axis represents attaching no importance to anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric, while 10 represents attaching extreme importance to it. The line of best fit was produced using polynomial regression.

21. Seth Jolly et al., "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019", *Electoral Studies* 75 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420>; Seth Jolly et al., "25 Years of Political Party Positions in Europe: The Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 1999-2024," working paper, <https://www.chesdata.eu/ches-europe>.

Chart 2.1. Correlation between European political parties' left-right identification and importance attached to anti-establishment rhetoric



Source: See Annex

In Chart 2.1 above, we can see that, generally, the more centrist a party is identified as, the less important anti-establishment rhetoric tends to be to it. With 0 on the x-axis representing the very far-left and 10 representing the very far-right, anti-establishment rhetoric is the least important to parties lying at 5.2 on the left-to-right scale.

That is not to say that the centre is merely, or even at all, pro-establishment – particularly if ‘establishment’ is to be understood in the sense of ‘established elites.’ The centre wishes to protect institutions from being captured by the interests of the elites, a core part of the centre’s belief in pro-institutionalism. It is worth contrasting the centre to how the left and the right often see institutions – as the mere means to achieving their political ends, as opposed to something that is of

itself valuable to a country's political framework.²² Examples of right-wing politicians dismantling institutions once they no longer serve the politician's political aims include the recent dismantling or weakening of several institutions, such as NATO,²³ under the administration of Donald Trump;²⁴ and, on the left, calls to defund policing²⁵ or the family.²⁶ Given the centre's relative preference for the maintenance of established institutions and existing political structures, and opposition to their capture by political interests, for the purposes of this report, we will define the centre in terms of three features: it is reformist, anti-revolutionary and pro-institutionalist.

This would suggest that the political continuum, rather than being a one-dimensional spectrum with only two opposite poles, has at least three opposite poles: the left, the centre and the right. Each of the left, the centre and the right can have something in common with each of the others. This is visualised in Figure 2.1 below.

22. For arguments explaining why institutions are good in and of themselves, see, for example, Marcin Piatkowski, *Europe's growth champion: Insights from the economic rise of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 9-12.

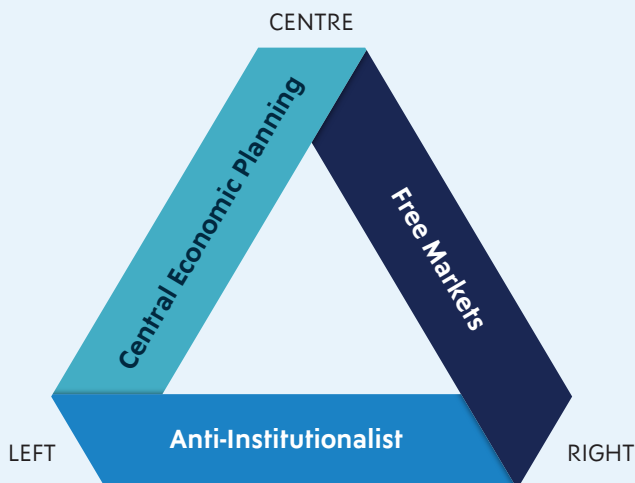
23. The Guardian, "Trump casts doubt on willingness to defend Nato allies 'if they don't pay'", <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/07/donald-trump-nato-alliance-us-security-support> (2025).

24. See, for example, Alex Gangitano, "Trump signs order to dismantle 7 federal agencies focused on media, libraries, homelessness", 15 March 2025.

25. See, for example, Sam Levin, "These US cities defunded police: 'We're transferring money to the community'", *The Guardian*, 11 March 2021.

26. Kathi Weeks, "Abolition of the family: the most infamous feminist proposal", *Feminist Theory* (2023), 433-453.

Figure 2.1. A two-dimensional political continuum with three opposite poles.



Naturally, in Figure 2.1 above, ‘pro-central economic planning,’ ‘pro-market’ and ‘anti-institutionalist’ are only examples of what each of the left, the centre and the right can have in common with one another, rather than an exhaustive list of their potential similarities.

By defining the centre, we can distinguish the centre-right from the non-centrist right and left; the centre-right is centrist, while the non-centrist right is not centrist. Indeed, all the characteristics of the political centre that we have just discussed – being in favour of reform and institutions and opposed to revolution – are also intuitively applicable to the centre-right.²⁷ We must now distinguish the centre-

27. The latter two in particular can be associated with the European centre-right as far back as the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars.

right from other forms of centrism.

The main other form of centrism, besides the centre-right, is the centre-left. As the names suggest, the centre-right is a more right-wing form of centrism as compared to the centre-left, which is the more left-wing form of centrism. The American comparative political scientist Ronald Inglehart suggested that the distinction amounts to whether “one supports or opposes social change in an egalitarian direction,” with support indicating a more left-wing position and opposition indicating a more right-wing position.²⁸

But this raises the question of what amounts to an “egalitarian direction.” Equality can have different ‘currencies’ – things in respect to which we seek equal outcomes.²⁹ The adoption of some currencies leads to intuitively left-leaning political ambitions: for example, to equalise everybody’s status or to equalise everybody’s material wealth. However, the adoption of other currencies can mean that “change in an egalitarian direction” takes a more intuitively right-wing slant.³⁰ For example, ‘equality of opportunity’ – the view that the currency of equality should be opportunity – has often been championed by what we intuitively consider the political right, especially when it has come into conflict with other currencies of equality. One example is the debate on hiring and electoral quotas. Quotas seek to provide sociodemographic groups that achieve worse outcomes with better opportunities in order to equalise those groups’ outcomes with those of the general population. In this scenario, equality of outcomes runs counter to equality of opportunity and it is both the right-leaning (anti-quota) and the left-leaning (pro-quota) positions that support “social change in an egalitarian direction,” just with different currencies of equality.³¹ Yet it would also be wrong to say that right-leaning policies

28. Cited in Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien, *Left and Right in Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 10.

29. G. A. Cohen, “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice”, *Ethics* (1989), 906.

30. Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien, *Left and Right in Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 10.

31. Cf. Drude Dahlerup, “Electoral Gender Quotas: Between Equality Of Opportunity And Equality Of Result”, *Journal of Representative Democracy* (2007), 73-92.

always seek merely to maximise equality of opportunity, so the left-right distinction is not merely between different forms of egalitarianism.

Some political scientists suggest that producing a meaningful distinction between the left and the right is, nowadays, impossible, as the terms are used arbitrarily. The political scientist David Ricci writes that the political right “resembles a Rorschach ink-blot whose edges have no particular shape”,³² and the English sociologist Lord Anthony Giddens argued that globalisation and their widespread use had emptied the terms ‘right’ and ‘left’ of much of their meaning.³³

Box 2.1. The European centre-right and other centre-rights

The focus of this report is on the European centre-right as opposed to the centre-right globally and as opposed to in other geographical areas, such as the Anglosphere, the ‘Global West’ or Eurasia, all of which are home to different centre-right traditions – for example, Christian democracy does not feature as a major political tradition in Asian or African centre-right movements. This means that our analysis is limited in scope and is not applicable to some important and powerful centre-rights, such as the American centre-right. This is also deliberate, and we are doing it for two reasons. First, by limiting our scope to the European centre-right, there exists data that allow us to solve the definitional problem just explored and clearly distinguish the European centre-right from the European centre-left. Second, this report is a co-production of Bright Blue and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung – our shared organisational aims and expertise are focused on Europe, and not on other geographical areas.

The best way to define the difference between the European centre-right and centre-left is through the approach to defining political

32. Cited in Noam Gidron and Daniel Ziblatt, “Center-Right Political Parties in Advanced Democracies”, *Annual Review of Political Science* (2019), 20.

33. Cited in Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien, *Left and Right in Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

ideologies suggested by the English political scientist Michael Freeden. Belonging to a political ideology, Freeden writes, does not consist in partaking in a single essential feature of said ideology, but rather in partaking in most of the ideology's "core concepts," all of which can be identified empirically.³⁴

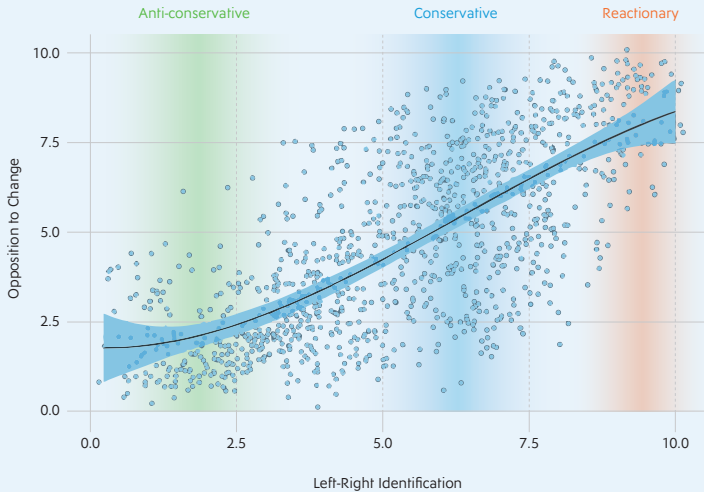
Therefore, using the aforementioned Chapel Hill surveys, we sought to differentiate centre-right parties from centre-left parties using empirical data; that is, a survey of political scientists' views on the features of political parties across Europe and their positioning on a left-to-right political spectrum. By limiting the scope of our inquiry to Europe, the concepts of centre-right and centre-left are used consistently enough for said concepts to be identified.

First, the centre-right is cautious about change, but not overly so, distinguishing it both from the reaction, which wants to reverse changes that have already taken place; and from the left, which wants to see more radical changes take place, particularly in respect to long-standing traditions. We will refer to this core principle as 'conservatism.'

In five surveys conducted between 2006 and 2024, Chapel Hill asked hundreds of political scientists across Europe about the role of religious principles in politics and positions on social and cultural values represented by all major European political parties, with 10 on our Chart representing strong support for religious principles in politics, strong opposition to liberal social lifestyle policies and strong support for traditional cultural values and 0 representing the converse. We weighted and averaged those responses according to the methodology mentioned earlier. The line of best fit was produced using polynomial regression. A more detailed methodology can be found in the Annex, at the end of the report. The relationship between identification on a left-to-right political spectrum and support for conservatism is illustrated in Chart 2.2 below.

34. Michael Freeden, "The Morphological Analysis of Ideology", in Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 163-164.

Chart 2.2. Correlation between European political parties' left-right identification and opposition to change



Source: See Annex

In Chart 2.2 above, we can see that, generally, the more right-wing a party is, the more sceptical attitudes about change it represents. With 0 on the y-axis representing extreme support for very radical change and 10 representing total aversion to change, cautiousness about change increases by 0.76 on the scale for each increase of 1 on the left-to-right political scale.

The centre-right's conservatism manifests itself in the data particularly in two ways, as elaborated on in the Annex. First, the centre-right values tradition. In particular, it values tradition more highly than the centre-left which, by comparison, is happier to sacrifice traditions for the sake of self-expression. With that said, the centre-right does not go as far as the reactionary right in prioritising tradition at the expense of any change. Second, the centre-right also does not see an issue with religious principles playing a role within politics, as opposed to the centre-left, which actively sees it as inappropriate.

Box 2.2. What is conservatism?

For the purposes of this report, we have focused on conservatism as a moderate cautiousness about change. However, it should be noted that the exact definition of conservatism is controversial. This is partly because conservatism reflects an attitude that applies not just to politics, but also more broadly. The authoritative Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, in agreement with the definition of this report, describes it as “the instinctive human fear of sudden change, and tendency to habitual action”.³⁵

Often, the person credited with first formulating a clear vision of political conservatism is the Anglo-Irish eighteenth-century politician Edmund Burke, whose writings on the French Revolution have come to define conservatism across the English-speaking world.³⁶

Burke’s conservatism is characterised by its opposition to purely abstract, revolutionary rationalism. He warns against the French Revolution on the basis that it is grounded in utopian, ideological visions of society as opposed to long-held customs and practical wisdom. His objection to the French Revolution was that “revolutionaries impose theory on political practice, when they should rather derive theory from it.” That is not to say that conservatives are opposed to reason – rather, on Burke’s views, they are opposed to an overconfidence in one’s own ability to work out what is right purely through supposedly rational thought, without appeal to practical experience. In particular, Burke places practical experience as residing within the institutional wisdom of “bastions” that include family, community and church.³⁷

Burke, however, represents a distinctly Anglophone approach to conservatism. The British philosopher John Skorupski rightly contrasts it with “rational conservatism” that is more characteristic of conservative

35. Andy Hamilton, “Conservatism” in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2020).

36. Cf. Richard Bourke, “Burke was no conservative”, <https://aeon.co/essays/conservatives-cant-claim-edmund-burke-as-one-of-their-own> (2015).

37. Andy Hamilton, “Conservatism” in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2020).

thinkers from continental Europe.³⁸ The most influential figure here is the great German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, though the difficulty in interpreting the writings and legacy of Hegel means that his political allegiance remains the subject of debate.³⁹ Rational conservatives maintain that one can rationally figure out, without the need to resort to practical experience, that conservative virtues such as community, loyalty, temperance and patriotism are universally true and universally conducive to human well-being.⁴⁰ Rational conservatism also describes the political philosophy that has been largely characteristic of the Catholic Church at least until the 1962 Second Vatican Council – following which the political identity of the Catholic Church is harder to pinpoint – and based on the thought of various pre-Hegelian Catholic philosophers and theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, the historian Evanthis Hatzivassiliou identifies the emergence of the centre-right across continental Europe after 1945 as “a natural extension of existing and deeply held Catholic” beliefs.⁴¹

Indeed, conservatism is deeply linked to religiosity. Religious voters reliably vote for conservative parties – for example, in the UK in 2019, religious voters self-identifying as British were over 50% more likely to vote for the Conservative Party than their non-religious counterparts.⁴² Religious voters vote for conservative parties both when confronted with more left-leaning alternatives, such as in the case of the centre-left Labour Party in the UK, and also with more right-leaning alternatives, such as in 1930s Germany where religiosity was very strongly and negatively correlated with voting for the Nazi Party.⁴³ This is because

38. John Skorupski, “The Conservative Critique of Liberalism”, in Steven Wall (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 402.

39. Hegel was in support of moderate liberalising reforms in Prussia at the time of his life, but those are compatible with modern conservatism. Particularly following Hegel’s death, however, his writings have often been used in support of left-wing ideas.

40. Andy Hamilton, “Conservatism” in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2020).

41. Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, “The Emergence of a New European Centre-Right, 1945–1962”, in Constantine Arvanitopoulos (ed.), *Reforming Europe: The Role of the Centre-Right* (Berlin: Springer, 2009), 218.

42. Ed Fieldhouse et al., “British Election Study, 2019: Post-Election Random Probability Survey”, *UK Data Service* (2022).

43. Sascha Becker and Hans-Joachim Voth, “From the Death of God to the Rise of Hitler”, *cesifo Working Papers* (2023).

conservatives are protective of religion both in cases where left-leaning politicians attempt to reduce the presence of religion altogether and where right-leaning politicians attempt to substitute the established religion – Christianity in the case of 1930s Germany – with a totalitarian ethos; effectively a new form of religion. Conservatives often believe both in the metaphysical claims of the established religion but also in the positive practical effects of religion, such as its effect on social trust,⁴⁴ mental wellbeing⁴⁵ and charitable endeavours.⁴⁶

The two approaches to political conservatism – Burkean and rational – are similar insofar as they arrive at similar conclusions from different methodologies – both maintain the importance of family, religion, community and established traditions, but the former approach maintains it on the basis of practical experience, while the latter approach maintains it as a conclusion of a rational exercise.

Important to note is that political conservatism is also not opposed to change or modernisation – something characteristic of reactionaries, not conservatives. It advocates moderate reform in order to preserve the things that it deems valuable in a changing world; “a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation,” in the words of Burke.⁴⁷

Finally, it might seem that conservatism is very similar to centrism. Both centrism and conservatism are anti-revolutionary. Moreover, if somebody is cautious about change away from existing institutions and practices, and, if change is to be achieved, they only want to achieve it through slow, piecemeal reform, they are a conservative, insofar as

44. Ozan Aksoy and Dingeman Wiertz, “The impact of religious involvement on trust, volunteering, and perceived cooperativeness: evidence from two British panels”, *European Sociological Review* (2024), 143–159; Ryan Shorthouse, Sam Lampier and Anvar Sarygulov, “Distant neighbours? Understanding and measuring social integration in England”, https://brightblue.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Distant_Neighbours_Final.pdf (2019), 71

45. Rakib Ehsan, “Keep the Faith: Mental Health in the UK”, <https://iifl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/IIFL-faith-and-wellbeing-report-RGB-final.pdf> (2023).

46. Stewardship, “Generosity Report 2025”, <https://www.stewardship.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/Stewardship%20Generosity%20Report%202025.pdf> (2025); Department for Culture, Media and Sport, “Community Life Survey 2023/24: Volunteering and charitable giving”, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-volunteering-and-charitable-giving> (2024).

47. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in the version by Jonathan Bennett presented at www.earlymoderntexts.com (2016), 11.

they are cautious about change, but they are also pro-institutional and reformist, and so they are a centrist. Contradiction only arises in contexts where the existing institutions or practices are anti-conservative or seek to drive rapid, reckless, ideologically-driven change. Then, to avoid even more radical change, a conservative might turn against institutions and seek to abolish or capture them as quickly as possible. This draws at the distinction between relativistic and non-relativistic conservatism. While the former “suggests that if socialism, feudalism or fascism works well in some country, one should try to make it run better through minor improvements based on experience and accumulated wisdom,” the latter has no tolerance for societies that are not amendable to the preservation of conservative values or traditions.⁴⁸ Indeed, across all contexts, conservatism is more specific than centrism, as it always also includes a component of respect towards tradition and traditional values.

Therefore, in sum, we take political conservatism, in the sense of temperance towards change and respect towards tradition and traditional values, to be one of the core concepts of the European centre-right.

While conservatism is one of the core principles of the European centre-right, it is not its only core principle.

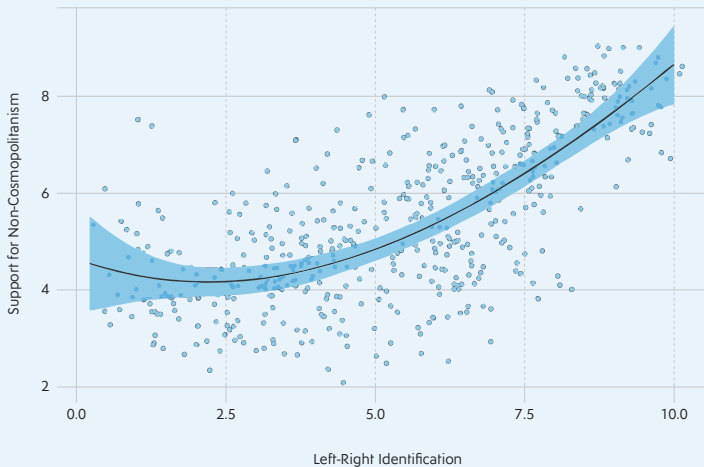
Second, the centre-right values the culture and people local to it: it is notably less cosmopolitan than the centre-left. For the lack of a better word, we will refer to this core principle as ‘non-cosmopolitanism.’

In two surveys conducted between 2019 and 2024, Chapel Hill asked hundreds of political scientists across Europe about all major European political parties’ positions on nationalism, immigration, multiculturalism and the centralisation of regions, with 0 on our Chart representing strongly favouring trade liberalisation, cosmopolitan conceptions of society, liberal immigration policy, multiculturalism and the political centralisation of localities. We weighted and averaged those

48. Andy Hamilton, “Conservatism” in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2020).

responses according to the methodology mentioned earlier. The line of best fit was produced using polynomial regression. A more detailed methodology can be found in the Annex, at the end of the report. The relationship between identification on a left-to-right political spectrum and support for non-cosmopolitanism is illustrated in Chart 2.3 below.

Chart 2.3. Correlation between European political parties' left-right identification and support for non-cosmopolitanism



Source: See Annex

In Chart 2.3 above, we can see that, generally, the centre-left is most strongly associated with cosmopolitanism. With 0 on the y-axis representing extreme support for cosmopolitanism and 10 representing no support for cosmopolitanism, support for cosmopolitanism peaks at 1.8 on the left-to-right identification scale.⁴⁹

49. Worth noting is that, in 2006, Chapel Hill asked a question explicitly about cosmopolitanism. We did not include it in the polynomial regression due to it not having been repeated before or after 2006, but the correlation it produced with self-identification on the left-to-right political scale was very similar to the correlation visible in Chart 2.3, with cosmopolitanism being most supported by those identifying at 2.7 on the left-to-right scale.

The centre-right's non-cosmopolitanism manifests itself in several ways, as elaborated on in the Annex: not only is the centre-right happier to restrict immigration from outside their local country, but it also emphasises the importance of immigrants assimilating into the local culture. In foreign policy, the centre-right looks to maximise the interests of its own country or locality as opposed to looking out for the interests of other countries – although the latter often coincides with the former.

Box 2.3. Non-cosmopolitanism

Non-cosmopolitanism is best associated with the belief that one owes the members of one's own, local community something more than one owes those outside of it.⁵⁰ Much like conservatism, it expresses a broader attitude that is reflective of more than just politics. This is as contrasted with cosmopolitanism, the attitude that all individuals belong primarily to one, shared community, rather than distinct and localised communities.⁵¹ Indeed, the divide between the supporters and detractors of cosmopolitanism is broadly reflective of the difference in preferences between what the British journalist David Goodhart describes as Somewheres (non-cosmopolitans) and Anywheres (cosmopolitans).⁵² In practical terms, non-cosmopolitanism materialises itself in prioritising policies that benefit one's local community over and above people in general. Specific political ideologies expressive of non-cosmopolitanism include protectionism; agrarianism; and opposition to high levels of immigration or foreign aid, especially if they are not seen as ultimately serving the interests of the local community. When non-cosmopolitans engage with foreign policy, it is with the aim of prioritising the interests of their own country rather than with the view that the interests of all countries should be prioritised by them equally. Radical non-cosmopolitans may refuse to engage in foreign policy substantively altogether and adopt foreign policy isolationism.

50. David Miller, "Cosmopolitanism: a critique", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (2002), 80.

51. Pauline Kleingeld and Eric Brown, "Cosmopolitanism" in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2019).

52. David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).

Among recent thinkers, the view that one owes the members of one's own community something more than one owes those outside of it has been advocated for by the great American political philosopher John Rawls, who maintained that "persons who engage in a system of cooperation acquire special rights to the [advantages] produced by that cooperation and have entitlements to these goods that non-participants lack," with national communities being examples of such systems.⁵³ Rawls also maintained that competition between rival communities, and their ability to self-prioritise, is necessary to prevent a global despotism where the interests of one particular community can be completely jettisoned in the name of some global benefit.⁵⁴ Another, pragmatic argument for non-cosmopolitanism is made by the English liberal philosopher David Miller. He notes that we are more inclined to fulfil our duties towards people local to us due to our shared experiences.⁵⁵ He likewise argues that local community provides a grounding for social attachment, identity and meaning in life, all of which is valuable, and therefore it should rightly be nurtured and prioritised.⁵⁶

Non-cosmopolitanism ought not to be conflated with conservatism. Rawls, referenced here, would generally not be described as a conservative. Although conservatives generally believe in the importance of community in general, this does not necessitate prioritising one's local community above and beyond other communities. As noted by Tim Bale, Christian democrats, for example, have traditionally been conservatives as well as moderate cosmopolitans; they believe strongly in universalism and European integration while eschewing nationalism while, at the same time, strongly supporting the presence of religious principles in politics.⁵⁷

We take non-cosmopolitanism, in the sense prioritising the members of one's own community over those outside of it, to be one of the core concepts of the European centre-right.

53. Cited in Simon Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 134.

54. Cited in Pauline Kleingeld and Eric Brown, "Cosmopolitanism" in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2019).

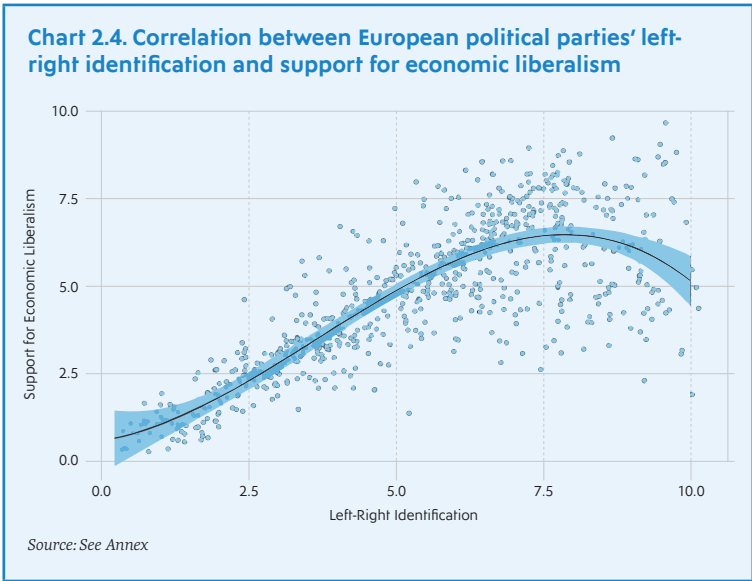
55. David Miller, *Citizenship and National Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 31.

56. Gillian Brock and Nicole Hassoun, "Global Justice" in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2023).

57. Tim Bale and Aleks Szczerbiak, "Why Is There No Christian Democracy in Poland – And Why Should We Care?", *Party Politics* (2008), 484.

Finally, the centre-right believes that the best economic model is one in which the markets are largely free of government control. We will refer to this core principle as ‘economic liberalism.’

In three surveys conducted between 2014 and 2024, Chapel Hill asked hundreds of political scientists across Europe about all major European political parties’ positions on tax, deregulation, redistribution and government economic intervention, with 10 on our Chart representing full opposition to state intervention in the economy and redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor as well as strong support for the deregulation of markets and reducing taxes rather than improving public services. We weighted and averaged those responses according to the methodology mentioned earlier. The line of best fit was produced using polynomial regression. A more detailed methodology can be found in the Annex, at the end of the report. The relationship between identification on a left-to-right political spectrum and support for economic liberalism is illustrated in Chart 2.4 below.



In Chart 2.4 above, we can see that, generally, the centre-right is most strongly associated with support for economic liberalism. With 0 on the y-axis representing no support for economic liberalism and 10 representing extreme support for economic liberalism, support for economic liberalism peaks at 7.5 on the left-to-right self-identification scale.

The centre-right's economic liberalism manifests itself in a few ways, as elaborated on in the Annex. It has a much less favourable view of economic redistribution from the rich to the poor than the centre-left and is much more supportive of economic deregulation. It is not as willing to increase taxes to fund public services as the centre-left and is less happy to introduce protectionist measures at the expense of trade liberalisation.

Box 2.4. Economic liberalism

In this report, economic liberalism is used synonymously with fiscal liberalism,⁵⁸ or the political position of being pro-market. Although a philosophical position for some – with notable examples including the twentieth-century academics Friedrich Hayek and Robert Nozick – it is often primarily grounded in disagreements about economic theory. Economic liberals believe that market-based policies – those that give economic agents⁵⁹ freedom to do as they will, as opposed to the government restricting, promoting, necessitating or otherwise controlling certain economic behaviours – produce better economic outcomes. By economic outcomes, this refers to a plethora of factors that are generally deemed to be important by economists, such as high economic growth – usually measured in terms of GDP – high productivity, high real wages, low levels of poverty, low levels of unemployment and manageable levels of inflation. Economic liberalism can be contrasted with various forms of economic illiberalism – the view that the economy should be controlled

58. This phrase has the opposite meaning in North America, where economic liberalism would be more aptly associated with fiscal conservatism.

59. Consumers and businesses.

by the state, such as is the case with mercantilism – and non-statist forms of socialism, which attempt to redistribute wealth across an economy in an egalitarian direction without an excessive expansion in state power; something most notably attempted by social democracy.

Economic liberalism bears close resemblance to liberalism per se, since, like liberalism, it is based on the assumption that individuals generally know better than the government what is best for them. While liberalism makes that assumption more generally, economic liberalism makes that assumption regarding economic decision-making; an economic agent knows better how to use their money in a way that would benefit them than the government does. In that, the justification for economic liberalism is closely related to the economic calculation problem, popularised by Friederich Hayek – governments do not have access to sufficient information or processing power to factor in all the considerations that economic agents make when they take economic decisions when producing and executing economic policy.⁶⁰

In practical terms, this means that economic agents should have access to more of their money, and so be taxed less, since they will spend it better than the government would; and that economic agents should not be restricted, at least to a maximum degree, in what kind of economic activity they want to engage in, and so that the economy should not be excessively regulated.

A couple of philosophical arguments for economic liberalism also merit mentioning. First, economic liberalism is argued to be more respectful of property rights than the alternatives – an argument first made by the English philosopher John Locke – insofar as it does not appropriate economic agents' property through taxation and it does not restrict what economic agents can do with their property.⁶¹ Second, Hayek argues that the abandonment of economic liberalism inevitably leads to totalitarianism. This is because central economic planning inevitably

60. Leland Yeager, "Mises and Hayek on Calculation and Knowledge", *The Review of Austrian Economics* (1994), 93.

61. Jeremy Waldron, "Property and Ownership" in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2023).

involves coercion, while the market economy “is the only method by which our activities can be adjusted to each other without the coercive or arbitrary intervention of authority”.⁶²

Economic liberalism nowadays is most often opposed by those who see it as insufficiently egalitarian, such as socialists or social democrats. The two are sometimes distinguished by pointing out that economic liberals look at economic transactions deontologically – that is, what matters is that every individual transaction is just, and so does not involve violence, theft, rewards those who deserve it, and so on – while socialists look at economic transactions consequentially – what matters is that the distribution framework produced by economic transactions in general is just, and so does not involve gross inequalities or lower overall welfare.⁶³ Naturally, it is possible to think that both transactional justice and distributive justice are important and that the two considerations ought to be balanced. Indeed, the distribution achieved by economic liberalism over the past few decades is arguably more just than the one that preceded it. The global extreme poverty rate has declined from 59% in 1950 to only 8% in 2019,⁶⁴ which coincides with the adoption of increasingly economically liberal policies worldwide, though it is debatable whether the latter is a cause for the former.⁶⁵

We take economic liberalism, in the sense of placing a preference on economic policies that do not excessively restrict or control the markets, to be the final core concept of the European centre-right.

We have now established the three core principles of the European centre-right – conservatism, non-cosmopolitanism and economic liberalism. We chose those three and only those three for two reasons. First, for the sake of simplicity. The addition of more principles is unlikely to preclude any political party that is not precluded by the

62. Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Oxford: Routledge, 1944), 37-38.

63. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 149-154.

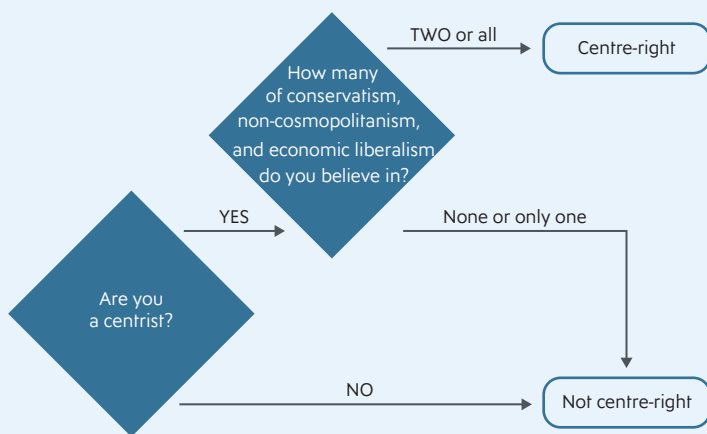
64. Nishant Yonzan et al., “Estimates of global poverty from WWII to the fall of the Berlin Wall”, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/estimates-global-poverty-wwii-fall-berlin-wall> (2022).

65. Cf. Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking away the ladder: Development strategy in historical perspective* (London: Anthem Press, 2003).

three principles already, nor is it likely to bring under the centre-right's umbrella a party or significant tradition that does not already adhere to at least some of our three principles. Second, the Chapel Hill data we are using does not support the existence of any principles clearly delineating the European left from the European right beyond those that we have already discussed – no clear correlation can be consistently drawn between the left-to-right identification and responses to any other question consistently featured in the Chapel Hill surveys that have not already been accounted for in the aforementioned principles.

Therefore, there are two tests for whether a political party or tradition is centre-right, at least insofar as Europe is concerned. First, a political party is *centre-right* only if it is centrist. Second, a political party is only *centre-right* if it subscribes to at least two of conservatism, non-cosmopolitanism and economic liberalism. Those tests are illustrated in Figure 2.2 below.

Figure 2.2. A flowchart for discerning whether a political party is centre-right or not



The tests allow us to draw a clear distinction between the centre-right and the non-centre-right, but still leave room for some ambiguity insofar as it may be ambiguous just whether a political party or political tradition is centrist, conservative, non-cosmopolitan or economically liberal. For example, if it is clear that Emmanuel Macron's *Renaissance* party is economically liberal and centrist, and that it is not conservative, but it is ambiguous whether it is non-cosmopolitan, then it remains ambiguous whether the *Renaissance* party is centre-right; it is clear that it passes the first test, but it is ambiguous whether it passes the second test.

Note that the three core principles of the centre-right – conservatism, non-cosmopolitanism and economic liberalism – can be in tension with each other. For example, non-cosmopolitanism can manifest itself through support for protectionist trade measures, which is at odds with economic liberalism. Those trade-offs mean that no consistent policy platform can maximise all three of the European centre-right's core principles, but instead must prioritise some at the expense of others. This is one reason why our definition of the European centre-right only requires two of the three core principles. Another reason is that, otherwise, our definition would be counter-intuitively restrictive, as it would preclude some intuitively centre-right parties, such as the relatively cosmopolitan but also relatively conservative and economically liberal German Christian democrats.

Note also that the three core principles of the European centre-right can be in tension with centrism: if a political movement is any of extremely conservative, non-cosmopolitan or economically liberal – as we have defined them – that may preclude them from being institutionalist, reformist or anti-revolutionary, and therefore from being centrist. For example, if somebody believes very strongly in the importance of non-cosmopolitan values and is willing to undermine national institutions in order to enact non-cosmopolitan policies – as is the case with the aforementioned example of Donald Trump – their

non-cosmopolitanism has come into tension with centrism, and so they cannot be called centre-right. This is why the centre-right is primarily a centrist ideology – the belief in centrism is what distinguishes the centre-right from the non-centrist right. Although a centre-right person might believe that a very radical change in a conservative, non-cosmopolitan or economically liberal direction is ultimately desirable, they are only interested in achieving that change through gradual, piecemeal, institutional reform rather than revolution or subversion of established institutions or the rule of law.

Some might object that, with the above, cross-sectional approach, rather than defining the centre-right, we merely described what the centre-right happens to have thought in the years between 1999 and 2019. A definition is meant to identify something essential to what it is defining, but the beliefs of the parties identified by political scientists as centre-right are malleable; for example, in the future, it could be no longer true that parties identified as centre-right generally support economic liberalism.

This objection misses the point. We are identifying the specific principles that are currently signified by the term centre-right in Europe, but we are not wedded to the term ‘centre-right’ itself. Indeed, the Irish centre-right, as described later in this report, eschews the term ‘centre-right.’ What we are interested in defining is the political philosophy that the term generally describes. Even if, in the future, ‘centre-right’ were to be described in some other way – if people who call themselves centre-right no longer identified with the principles described here, and if the people who identify themselves with the core principles we named called themselves something other than ‘centre-right’ – our definition would still be true. Analogously, if people in the future started describing Thatcherism as a heavy-handed approach to economics, a present definition of Thatcherism – something like ‘the ideology espoused by the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’ – would remain true, insofar as it still accurately defines the real historical phenomenon that it intends to define.

This is of significant consequence to the rest of this report. We will go on to identify what the centre-right across Europe might do in order to overcome its shared and most significant challenges. To do that, it may not depart from the core principles we identified, as that would constitute a self-effacing exercise. Even if what emerged out of said departure were to go on to be described as ‘centre-right’ by future commentators, perhaps in recognition of its historic heritage, it would not be the centre-right as we define it. In seeking to overcome the challenges that the centre-right across Europe faces we are interested in helping the centre-right survive, evolve and emerge stronger rather than in destroying it in all but name.

Finally, worth noting is that the definition here produced does not necessarily contradict some of the extensional definitions of the centre-right used as examples earlier. For example, centre-right liberals are centrist economic liberals first and foremost, but also subscribe to elements of conservatism and non-cosmopolitanism, which is what distinguishes them from centre-left liberals. Christian democrats are centrist conservatives first and foremost, but historically have always been opposed to socialism and left-wing economic planning. Liberal conservatives are both economic liberals and conservatives. Our definition does, however, contradict some of the aforementioned extensional definitions. For example, Noam Gidron and Daniel Ziblatt’s definition, which includes populist nationalists, is in at least this sense broader than ours. What this definition does is allow for a clear framework that can be used to justify calling a given party or movement centre-right – or for refusing to do so.

Conclusion

Having defined the European centre-right and established the philosophical underpinnings of the various ideas that the European centre-right brings together, this report now moves on to examine the centre-right in more concrete terms by conducting a series of case studies, each focused on a different European country. First, this report

looks at the history of and the challenges faced by the centre-right in the United Kingdom. The report then moves on to do the same with France, Poland, Germany and Ireland. It concludes by examining what challenges the centre-right faces in common across all these European countries and recommending how said challenges can be overcome.

Chapter Three:

The centre-right in the United Kingdom

Having outlined our definition of the European centre-right in Chapter Two, this Chapter now moves on to examine the history of the centre-right in the United Kingdom. There, it is represented chiefly by a single political outfit – the Conservative and Unionist Party – which is the world’s oldest and most electorally successful democratic political party.⁶⁶ This Chapter will first define the British centre-right, outline the key tenets of British centre-right philosophy, explain how those tenets have been applied by the British centre-right since the Second World War, before finally setting out the current challenges facing the British centre-right.

What is the UK centre-right?

Unlike in other European countries, the centre-right in the UK is consistently and clearly represented by the Conservative Party – as it is usually known. Tracing its origins to the reign of King Charles II in the 1670s – when the political movement was known as Toryism, and Tory is still often used to refer to contemporary British Conservatives – it began to assume its modern form in the 1830s.⁶⁷ Although it initially struggled to find its feet following the passage of the Great Reform Act

66. Adrian Wooldridge, “Britain’s Tories are the world’s most successful party. Here’s why”, *Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2019/12/21/britains-tories-are-the-worlds-most-successful-party-heres-why> (2019).

67. John Ramsden, *An appetite for Power: A history of the Conservative Party since 1830* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 17.

of 1832 – which introduced major changes to the UK’s electoral system, including the abolition of underpopulated aristocratic-dominated seats known as ‘rotten boroughs’, the creation of new seats in more populated areas, and an increase in the franchise from 500,000 to 813,000 people⁶⁸ – the Conservative Party dominated British politics in the twentieth century. Indeed, such was its dominance that no Conservative leader failed to become Prime Minister between 1945 and 1997.⁶⁹

This is not to say that the Conservative Party has been the only force on the centre-right of British politics. It should be stressed that it is possible to be philosophically centre-right in the UK but still be a representative, member or voter of another political party. However, in the British context, centre-right people are more likely to be Conservative Party representatives, members or voters relative to other parties in the UK. There are some other British political movements that could be described as centre-right, explored below.

First, the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats have traditionally been divided between ‘social liberals,’ that is, those who favour a larger state and generally eschew conservatism, and ‘economic’ liberals,⁷⁰ whose desire for a smaller state – or economic liberalism – is not completely incompatible with centre-right principles, as identified in Chapter Two. Indeed, the presence of senior ‘economic’ or ‘orange book’⁷¹ liberals within the Liberal Democrat Party leadership helped to facilitate the formation of the 2010 to 2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government.⁷² However, because the Liberal Democrats are often considered a party of the centre-left in British political discourse, and have tried to express their progressive credentials since their

68. Philip Norton, “History of the party 1: From tory to conservative”, in Philip Norton (ed.), *The Conservative Party* (London: Prentice Hall, 1996), 17–30.

69. Derek Brown, “Austen Chamberlain – history’s first Hague”, *The Guardian*, 8 June 2001.

70. Duncan Brack, “From protest to power: The Liberal Democrats, 1988–2010”, in Robert Ingham and Duncan Brack (eds.), *Peace, reform and Liberation: A history of Liberal politics in Britain, 1679–2011* (London: Biteback, 2011), 307–357.

71. See Paul Marshall and David Laws (eds.), *The orange book: Reclaiming liberalism* (London: Profile Books, 2004).

72. Peter Dorey and Mark Garnett, *The British Coalition Government, 2010–2015: A marriage of inconvenience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 13–16.

catastrophic 2015 election defeat, they largely fall beyond the scope of this Chapter, insofar as they share little with the three principles of the European centre-right we described in the second Chapter.⁷³

It could also be argued that certain elements of the otherwise centre-left British Labour Party also contain centre-right elements. For example, one of its sub-groups, Blue Labour, combines the non-cosmopolitan characteristic of the European centre-right with the statism of the centre-left.⁷⁴ Additionally, the Blair Government (1997-2007) implemented economically liberal policies to a much greater extent than previous Labour administrations. These policies included expanding the role of private companies in providing key government services like health and welfare, as well as dramatically increasing the use of Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) – where the government pays private-sector firms to build and manage public infrastructure on its behalf.⁷⁵ However, it still pursued less economically liberal policies, such as redistributive tax credits and increased investment in public services.⁷⁶

While Nigel Farage's various political vehicles, namely the UK Independence Party⁷⁷ and Reform UK (formerly known as the Brexit Party) also exist on the right of British politics, and share with the centre-right the tenet of non-cosmopolitanism, they would not fall within the definition of centre-right as set out in Chapter Two. Instead, the centrality of anti-establishment rhetoric to their appeal and their hostility to existing institutions, such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), mark them out as populist rather than centrist.⁷⁸

73. Roger Mortimore and Andrew Block (eds.), *Butler's British political facts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 382; Max von Thun, "The Lib Dems are ready to take up the progressive mantle – and offer robust opposition to Labour", *The Guardian*, 10 June 2024.

74. Philip Collins, "Maurice Glasman and the origins of Blue Labour", *Prospect*, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/69342/maurice-glasman-and-the-origins-of-blue-labour> (2025).

75. Tom Sasse et al., "Government outsourcing: What has worked and what needs reform?", <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/government-outsourcing-reform-WEB.pdf> (2019), 14, 34.

76. Tom Egerton and Anthony Seldon, "Learning from the successes and failures of post-war Labour governments", in Gerry Hassan and Simon Barrow (eds.), *Britain needs change: The politics of hope and Labour's challenge* (London: Biteback, 2024), 25-44.

77. See Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, *Revolt on the right: Explaining support for the radical right in Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

78. *The Week*, "What does Reform UK stand for?", <https://theweek.com/news/uk-news/954310/what-does-reform-uk-stand-for> (2025).

Regarding the politics of the devolved nations, the Scottish National Party, while once referred to as the ‘tartan Tories,’ now presents itself as a centre-left, rather than a centre-right, party.

Finally, the political system in Northern Ireland remains defined by a sectarian Catholic-Protestant divide, explored in more detail in this report’s Chapter on Ireland,⁷⁹ and only 18 of the UK’s 650 Members of Parliament (MPs) hail from Northern Ireland, so, for the sake of convenience, it falls beyond the scope of this analysis.

The Welsh political landscape is the most similar to that of Westminster than any devolved nation – Labour and the Conservatives remain the two largest parties in the Welsh Parliament, the *Senedd* – but it too has a large left-leaning nationalist party, Plaid Cymru.⁸⁰ As such, the focus of this Chapter will be on the parties at Westminster rather than those of the devolved legislatures.

Tenets of British Conservatism

For the sake of clarity, Conservatism refers to the philosophy of the British Conservative Party, not conservatism more generally, as defined in Chapter Two. On a further definitional point, and reflecting universal practice, the words ‘Conservative’ and ‘Tory’ are used interchangeably throughout.

This section will consider five key tenets of British conservatism: pragmatism, cautious social reform, support for existing institutions, defence of private property, and support for a more limited state. Throughout, it will explain how each of these tenets relates to one or more of the three principles of the European centre-right outlined in Chapter Two. It should be stressed that these are not the only tenets of British conservatism; merely that these are the most prevailing in its postwar history.

79. Alisa Henderson, Roger Awan-Scully and Jonathan Tonge, “The devolved nations”, in Robert Ford et al. (eds.), *The British General Election of 2019* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 421–59; BBC, “Northern Ireland Election 2024 Results”, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2024/uk/regions/N92000002> (2024).

80. BBC, “Welsh election results 2021: Labour’s road to victory in numbers”, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-politics-57026094> (2021).

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is central to British conservatism. Conservatives often claim to have no ideology, which they consider “something inflexible, inhumane and imposed upon society regardless of its practicality,” according to the historian Stuart Ball. This preference for empiricism also stems from a conservative scepticism about the power of human reason – no theory that is not grounded in experience is capable of accurately encompassing all of life’s complexities.⁸¹

Instead, Conservatives have long preferred to view themselves as empirical, practical thinkers and Conservatism as more akin a “creed” or “spirit”.⁸² To give a recent example, former Chief of Staff to the then-Prime Minister Theresa May, and now MP for West Suffolk, Nick Timothy, has argued that “to be a conservative is to reject abstract theory and ideology”.⁸³

Reflecting this, many Conservatives have traditionally been more likely to reference past Conservative leaders than philosophers as the source of their ideas. Indeed, major Conservative philosophers, like Michael Oakeshott, have had more influence on conservative philosophy than on the philosophy of the Conservative Party.⁸⁴ While Conservatives are more likely to reference philosophers and thinkers now than in the past and some Conservative MPs, like Jesse Norman, have explored them in depth,⁸⁵ even now many do so only in passing.

However, it is worth noting that, as leading historian of the Conservative Party, Ewen Green pointed out, thinking empirically actually is itself an ideological position.⁸⁶

The focus on empiricism has influenced the Party’s thinking in major

81. Stuart Ball, “The Principles of British Conservatism from Balfour to Heath, c.1910-75”, in Stuart Ball (ed.) *The Foundations of the British Conservative Party: Essays on Conservatism from Lord Salisbury to David Cameron* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 20.

82. *Ibid.*, 13-14.

83. Nick Timothy, *Remaking one nation: The future of conservatism* (London: Polity, 2020), 166.

84. Mark Garnett and Kevin Hickson, *Conservative thinkers: The key contributors to the political thought of the modern Conservative Party* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 6.

85. Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke* (London: William Collins, 2014).

86. Ewen Henry Green, *The crisis of conservatism: The politics, economics, and ideology of the British Conservative Party, 1880-1914* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 311-22.

ways. One notable feature of British Conservatism is its ‘positional’ nature. This means that, in the words of Stuart Ball, it “responds to situations and challenges as they are encountered rather than on the basis of a prior body of doctrine.” In turn, this meant that Conservatives have sometimes “lacked a power of initiation,” instead being “stimulated only in reaction to others”.⁸⁷

It should be stressed, however, that Conservatives are not initially against all forms of change. Indeed, change can be necessary to preserve cherished institutions.⁸⁸ Rather, they are in favour of initiating more gradual, incremental change as opposed to sudden and revolutionary change which could have unknown and devastating consequences, in line with the definition of conservatism outlined in Chapter Two.⁸⁹ In this regard, conservatives view society as analogous to a living organism – like any living organism, society will naturally but steadily evolve over time.⁹⁰ As such, this tenet embodies the conservatism principle from Chapter Two of this report.

Moreover, as will become clearer later in this Chapter, the positional nature of British conservatism changed during the Margaret Thatcher years – she was the Conservative Party leader between 1975 and 1990 and Prime Minister between 1979 and 1990 – with her Government driving through considerable economic reforms. More recently, albeit partly in response to fears of being outflanked on the right by the emerging UK Independence Party (UKIP) – explored in more detail later in this Chapter – as well as to appease internal pressures, the Conservative Party spearheaded the UK’s most dramatic constitutional shakeup in decades: the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union in 2020.

87. Stuart Ball, *Portrait of a party: The Conservative Party in Britain 1918-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23.

88. *Ibid.*

89. Philip Norton, “The principles of Conservatism”, in Philip Norton (ed.), *The Conservative Party* (London: Prentice Hall, 1996), 68-82, 72-3.

90. John Barnes, “Ideology and factions”, in Anthony Seldon and Stuart Ball (eds.), *Conservative century: The Conservative Party since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 315-45, 321-22.

Cautious social reform

Through its support for prioritising vulnerable people in our country via cautious social reform, this tenet reflects largely the principle of non-cosmopolitanism, but also conservatism because of the incremental approach and an attempt to thwart social unrest.

Cautious social reform has long been a key tenet of modern Conservatism. Claiming to follow in a tradition begun by the nineteenth-century Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli,⁹¹ British conservatives have either supported or initiated the gradual extension of social reform measures, such as the extension of state-funded education or unemployment insurance.⁹² This tenet was especially important in the early post-war years.

As will be seen in this Chapter, while professed support for extending the provision of government services was at least in part down to fears of being seen as either reactionary or heartless, it was also due to the genuine commitment of individual conservatives, such as Rab Butler in the forties, to expanding opportunities for all those who wish to take advantage of them.

The Conservative conception of social reform is also quite distinct from that of the left. Whereas the left typically views services such as benefits payments or state-funded education as forms of wealth redistribution, Conservatives view them as a means to help individuals to help themselves and to prevent social unrest.⁹³ This is also why most British Conservatives have an instinctive preference for insurance-based welfare that links benefits received with contributions paid in.⁹⁴ Finally, any extension of social services, however desirable, should only occur when public finances are strong enough to pay for it.⁹⁵

91. Barnes, "Ideology and factions", 329-330.

92. For pre-war conservatism and social reform, see William Prescott, "British Conservative Party and the state", (Oxford: Oxford University Research Archive, 2020).

93. Norton, "The principles of Conservatism", 77.

94. Timothy Raison, *Tories and the welfare state: A history of conservative social policy since the Second World War* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990), 5.

95. Quintin Hogg, *The case for conservatism* (West Drayton, Middlesex: Penguin, 1947), 205-206.

Support for existing institutions

British Conservatives have traditionally supported existing institutions and values which include, among others, the monarchy, the established church,⁹⁶ parliamentary government and the rule of law. These were important because, as Lord Norton has put it, “they represent continuity with the past and they embody the unity of society and the norms of conduct of that society”.⁹⁷ Like the pragmatism tenet, this one also embodies the conservatism tenet of the modern European centre-right.

There has been a shift in recent years, however, with Conservative attacks on institutions ranging from the civil service to the national broadcaster – the BBC – and the judiciary. This is partly because increasing numbers of Conservatives have come to see them as either incompetent or inherently hostile to Conservative ideas⁹⁸ as well as in an attempt to mimic the tactics of the increasingly successful populist right. In 2019, for example, former Conservative Party Leader Lord Howard complained of a “self-perpetuating judicial oligarchy” that would, on occasion, “distort the meaning of the Act of Parliament of which they are interpreting ... in order to reach the result they want to achieve”.⁹⁹ Similarly, while running for the Tory leadership in 2019, Boris Johnson condemned the BBC as the “Brexit-Bashing Corporation”.¹⁰⁰

Support for private property

Conservatives have stressed the importance of defending private property rights, which aligns with the European centre-right principles of economic liberalism and conservatism. This serves several purposes. First, property rights act, in the words of former Conservative MP

96. Stuart Ball, “The Principles of British Conservatism from Balfour to Heath, c.1910-75”, in Stuart Ball (ed.) *The Foundations of the British Conservative Party: Essays on Conservatism from Lord Salisbury to David Cameron* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

97. Philip Norton, “The principles of Conservatism”, 77.

98. Robert Colville, “For tomorrow’s Tories the real enemy is not Labour but the institutions of Britain”, *The Times*, 19 November 2023.

99. Ashley Cowburn, “Former Tory leader attacks Supreme Court and accuses judges of ‘distorting’ law to reach desired outcome”, *The Independent*, 28 December 2019.

100. The Editor, “The Guardian view on the Tories and the BBC: a backlash sees off an immediate threat”, *The Guardian*, 17 January 2022.

and later Cabinet Minister, Quintin Hogg, as “the natural bulwark of liberty” by giving property holders greater independence from, and ability to stand up to, the state.¹⁰¹

Second, by providing “an individual [with] a stake in society,” defending property rights reduced the attractiveness, and therefore chances of, any revolution which might threaten that stake, thus supporting the principle of conservatism.¹⁰² As will be discussed later in this Chapter, this conviction was a key driver of post-war housing policy in the fifties and eighties.

Third, Conservatives believe, respect for private property is an essential driver of prosperity. If able to benefit from the fruits of their labours, individuals will have an incentive not only to become more self-reliant, but also to provide goods, services and employment opportunities that will benefit the entire community, not just the producer.

Defending property rights will inevitably, however, lead to property being unequally distributed.¹⁰³ In contrast to the ideas of the left, which aim for equality of outcome, conservatives have viewed the continued existence of at least some inequality as the inevitable by-product of differences in ability and ambition between people.¹⁰⁴

As well as undermining prosperity, attempts to abolish inequality will, Conservatives argue, risk a slide into tyranny. This is because, for the state to redistribute wealth equally among all people, it would require almost dictatorial powers that would be highly liable to abuse.¹⁰⁵

Support for a more limited state

Closely connected to support for private property, another key tenet of British Conservatism is support for a more limited state. Wherever possible, Conservatives prefer goods and services to be provided by

101. Quintin Hogg, *The case for conservatism* (West Drayton, Middlesex: Penguin, 1947), 97.

102. Barnes, “Ideology and factions”, 325.

103. Norton, “The principles of Conservatism”, 75.

104. Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The politics and philosophy of inequality* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 7-8.

105. William Prescott, “British Conservative Party and the state”, (Oxford: Oxford University Research Archive, 2020), 48-9

private or third sector organisations rather than by the state.

Conservatives believe that the state's primary function should be the protection of individual freedom.¹⁰⁶ This desire for a more limited state stems both from a fear that giving it too much power would threaten that freedom,¹⁰⁷ but also from a belief that the state is inherently less efficient than the private sector.¹⁰⁸ In this regard, this tenet aligns with the economic liberalism principle of the European centre-right.

Crucially, this does not mean that Conservatives oppose all state intervention, merely that they seek to limit it to areas where the private sector has failed and only intervene to the minimum extent necessary to rectify that failure.¹⁰⁹

While, as will be discussed below, the Conservative Party era has taken a more sceptical attitude towards the state than its main rival, the Labour Party, throughout the post-war era, the importance it attached towards actively trying to reduce the size of the state greatly increased during the premierships of Margaret Thatcher (1979-90) and David Cameron (2010-16).

Divides within British conservatism

As to be expected with any large organisation, there are different groupings within the Conservative Party that place stress on different issues. Moreover, the influence of the different groupings has fluctuated over time.¹¹⁰

One commonly cited divide,¹¹¹ dating back at least to the sixties,¹¹²

106. Stuart Ball, "The Principles of British Conservatism from Balfour to Heath, c.1910-75", in Stuart Ball (ed.) *The Foundations of the British Conservative Party: Essays on Conservatism from Lord Salisbury to David Cameron* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 31.

107. Philip Norton, "The principles of Conservatism", 75.

108. William Prescott, "British Conservative Party and the state", (Oxford: Oxford University Research Archive, 2020), 282.

109. *Ibid.*

110. Ewen Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 250.

111. Harriet Overton Warner Jones, "The Conservative Party and the Welfare State 1942-1955" (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London, 1992); Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The politics and philosophy of inequality* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

112. John Selin Saloma, "British Conservatism and the welfare state: An analysis of the policy-process within the Conservative Party" (Harvard: Harvard University, 1961), 47-57.

but most prominently articulated by historian W. H. Greenleaf,¹¹³ is that between the libertarian or neo-liberal and the one nation or collectivist strands of Conservatism. The one nation Conservatives, on the one hand, are willing to accept state intervention so long as it does not undermine private property rights or engender totalitarianism.¹¹⁴ By contrast, the libertarian strand is much more sceptical about the value of state intervention and more economically liberal.¹¹⁵ While the one nation strand was more dominant in the years following the Second World War, the libertarians subsequently enjoyed “a notable stimulus or revival” under the leadership of Thatcher.¹¹⁶

In a similar vein, and much more recently, the political scientist Peter Dorey divides Conservatives into two main groups based on their attitudes towards inequality, although he acknowledges that many individual Conservatives fall somewhere between either extreme. In Dorey’s account, one nation conservatives support some limits to inequality “not least to facilitate social cohesion and political stability,” reflecting non-cosmopolitanism and conservatism, while libertarian conservatives believe there should be “no limits” on inequality, essentially an extreme form of economic liberalism¹¹⁷

With that said, the divide is not clear-cut. As the historian E. H. H. Green notes, many individual Conservatives held both libertarian and one nation beliefs on different issues simultaneously.¹¹⁸

A slightly different interpretation was offered by the political scientist Kevin Hickson, who divided Conservatives into four groups: “traditional Toryism,” “New Right,” “Centrist” and “One Nation”.¹¹⁹ The traditional Tories, for example, are especially concerned with “a strong sense of patriotism, defence of the established social order and

113. W. H. Greenleaf, *The British political tradition volume two: The ideological heritage* (London, 1983).

114. *Ibid.*, 262.

115. *Ibid.*, 264.

116. *Ibid.*, 308.

117. Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The politics and philosophy of inequality* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 3.

118. Ewen Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 261.

119. Kevin Hickson (ed.), *The political thought of the Conservative Party since 1945* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

respect for tradition and authority.” By contrast, the “dominant strand” of the New Right “was a [libertarian] one.” Centrists, meanwhile, “are concerned primarily with party unity and loyalty to the party.” Finally, the One Nation view stresses “the need to preserve social unity, which is determined by social class antagonisms”.¹²⁰ All of these groups prioritised one or more of the three principles of the European centre-right.

Having briefly outlined its core tenets, this Chapter will now consider how these beliefs have been applied and have been more dominant at different times in modern history, since the Second World War.

History of the British centre-right

British Conservatism in the early postwar years, 1945-64

The first postwar election was disastrous for the Conservatives. Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s wartime leadership was not enough, in the electorate’s mind, to counteract popular memories of inter-war appeasement and the perceived failure of the Conservative-dominated National Government, in office from 1931 until 1940, to mitigate the worst effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s.¹²¹ A poor election campaign and a cautious manifesto arguably made things worse.¹²² Accordingly, the Tories fell from 432 to just 213 Commons seats – with the House of Commons being the more important of the UK’s two parliamentary houses, the other being the House of Lords.¹²³

Despite this, Conservatives recovered quickly, narrowly falling short at the 1950 general election and scraping back into office when another general election was held in 1951.¹²⁴ The Tories went on to secure much larger majorities at the 1955 and 1959 general elections under Anthony

120. Mark Garnett and Kevin Hickson, *Conservative thinkers: The key contributors to the political thought of the modern Conservative Party* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 4, 104.

121. John Ramsden, *An appetite for Power: A history of the Conservative Party since 1830* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 315.

122. Kit Kowol, *Blue Jerusalem: British conservatism, Winston Churchill, and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 240-2, 270-1.

123. Roger Mortimore and Andrew Block (eds.), *Butler’s British political facts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 378.

124. David Butler, *The British general election of 1951* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 237.

Eden and Harold Macmillan respectively. They would finally lose office only in 1964 to Harold Wilson's revitalised Labour Party.

The Party's pragmatism and willingness to support cautious social reform were a large part of the reason for this recovery in the fifties. Indeed, pragmatism was the tenet that was most central to the Conservative Party and the UK centre-right throughout this period – or, in the context of European centre-right principles, conservatism.

When the 1945-1951 Labour Government, for example, nationalised large swathes of the economy, including coal, cable and wireless, civil aviation, electricity, gas, the Bank of England and steel, the Conservatives did not, for the most part, pledge to reverse these.¹²⁵ The succeeding 1951-55 Churchill Government oversaw the privatisation of the iron and steel industry but left everything else in state hands.¹²⁶ This was not because, as some have since claimed, Conservatives jettisoned their commitment to private property rights, but because denationalisation was politically and practically too difficult.¹²⁷ Pragmatism once again prevailed.

Similarly, while support for the expanded postwar welfare state was never unanimous within the Conservative Party, the Conservatives backed most of the Attlee Government's legislative changes and never sought to reverse them once in office.¹²⁸ These changes included the universalisation of the existing National Insurance and National Assistance systems – early iterations of the UK's social security system – as well as the creation of the National Health Service.

There were several reasons for this apparent Tory passivity. First, it helped that key features of the UK's early social security system were, as historian of the British welfare state Rodney Lowe put it, “inherently conservative” – they helped to preserve social cohesion and a commitment to capitalism from across the social spectrum, as well as involving

125. Kenneth Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-1951* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984), 94-110

126. Kathleen Burk, *The first privatisation: The politicians, the city and the denationalisation of steel* (London: Historians' Press, 1988).

127. Ian Gilmour and Mark Garnett, *Whatever happened to the Tories? The Conservatives since 1945* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), 36.

128. Mark Garnett and Kevin Hickson, *Conservative thinkers: The key contributors to the political thought of the modern Conservative Party* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 4.

contributory elements that incentivised personal responsibility.¹²⁹ The latter element was especially characteristic of British conservatives' cautious approach to social reform, as well as their preference to limit the state's role in financing new state schemes. Indeed, Conservatives had themselves gradually extended aspects of the welfare state along similar contributory lines before 1945,¹³⁰ and much of its postwar extension had already been planned by the 1940-1945 Churchill Coalition Government. This was not entirely out of political pragmatism but also, in at least some cases, a genuine belief in social reform.

Indeed, one of the major social reform measures of that era, the 1944 Education Act, which laid the foundation for UK education policy for the next several decades, was personally steered through by the Conservative President of the Board of Education, R.A. (Rab) Butler.¹³¹ While providing free secondary education and raising the school leaving age to 15, it was careful to respect existing institutions – public and grammar schools remained untouched – and its focus on academic selection reflected Conservative ideas about real differences in skills and abilities between people, as well as support for measures that helped individuals to realise their potential.¹³²

Moreover, even the most interventionist Conservatives still recognised the importance of property rights and only saw a role for the state where private enterprise had failed. For example, Harold Macmillan, who went on to become Prime Minister between 1957 and 1963,¹³³ had called for the nationalisation of the coal industry in his 1938 book, *The Middle Way*. Although Macmillan's writings predate his premiership, and thus the period covered by this report, they helped to set the

129. Rodney Lowe, *The welfare state in Britain since 1945* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 147.

130. See, e.g. William Prescott, "British Conservative Party and the state", (Oxford: Oxford University Research Archive, 2020).

131. John Ramsden, *The age of Churchill and Eden, 1740-1957* (London; New York: Longman, 1995), 39-40

132. Quintin Hogg, *The case for Conservatism* (West Drayton: Penguin, 1947), 143-5.

133. For the Macmillan Government, see Richard Lamb, *The Macmillan years: The emerging truth* (London: John Murray, 1995).

intellectual direction of the early postwar Conservative Party.¹³⁴ Even in that extreme case, made when Macmillan was on the Conservative Party's outer left fringe, that was only because he felt there was no alternative; not because he embraced state ownership for its own sake.¹³⁵ This reflects British conservatism's tendency towards pragmatism by embracing different ideas in order to achieve their desired goals.

While concerns around the practicalities of financing the welfare state grew from the late fifties onwards, they had little impact on the nature of the welfare state until the Thatcher era in the eighties, described later in this Chapter.¹³⁶ A strong welfare state was also helped by both the Conservative and Labour parties' shared aim to keep unemployment as low as possible, which was a reaction to popular memories of the Great Depression in the 1930s and the Conservatives' longstanding commitment to cautious social reform.¹³⁷

Moreover, when Labour enacted further social reforms, such as by moving away from the academic selection system in schools established in the 1944 Education Act from 1965 onwards, the Tories did not attempt to stop it.¹³⁸ This was in part a reflection of Conservative empiricism – contemporary evidence that the selective system was failing disadvantaged pupils¹³⁹ – but also out of pragmatic self-interest – Conservative-voting middle-class parents feared their children would not make it into the more prestigious grammar schools.¹⁴⁰

Finally, a relatively strong economy also helped to entrench support for the postwar order. Annual GDP growth averaged 3% between 1951

134. Mark Garnett and Kevin Hickson, *Conservative thinkers: The key contributors to the political thought of the modern Conservative Party* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 5.

135. Harold Macmillan, *The middle way: A study of the problem of economic and social progress in a free society* (Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1938, 1978 ed.).

136. Jose Harris, "Principles, markets and national interest in Conservative approaches to social policy in Clarisse Berthezène and Jean-Christian Vinel (eds.), *Postwar conservatism, a transnational investigation: Britain, France and the United States, 1930-1990* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 95-118), 106-8.

137. Ian Gilmour and Mark Garnett, *Whatever happened to the Tories? The Conservatives since 1945* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), 35; Andrew Taylor, "Economic statecraft", in Hickson (ed.), *Political thought of the Conservative Party*, 133-57. For a policy history of the National Government, see William Prescott, "British Conservative Party and the state", (Oxford: Oxford University Research Archive, 2020).

138. Tim Bale, *The Conservatives since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 127, 142.

139. Dominic Sandbrook, *White heat: A history of Britain in the swinging sixties* (London: Abacus, 2007), 332.

140. *Ibid.*, 332-5.

and 1964, unemployment remained low – averaging 500,000 – and items once considered luxuries such as phones, televisions and cars became widely available for the first time.¹⁴¹ For example, between September 1955 and November 1957 alone, household car ownership increased by 25%, television ownership by 32% and fridge ownership by 58%.¹⁴²

Housing represented a particular triumph for postwar Conservative social policy, demonstrating both the Conservative commitment to social reform but also to supporting the extension of private property ownership. Under Harold Macmillan, who served as Minister of Housing between 1951 and 1954, housebuilding rates hit over 300,000 per year, the target which Conservatives had first set themselves at the 1950 general election.¹⁴³ As well as addressing the postwar housing shortage, it also helped to add “substantially to the ranks of middle-class property owners,” thus electorally benefiting the Tories, who are traditionally largely supported by the middle class.¹⁴⁴

The early postwar period did, however, witness a shift in Conservative foreign policy away from prioritising the interests of the British Empire and towards seeking closer ties with the European Economic Community (EEC), which was founded in 1957. As seen in Box 3.1, this was at least partly out of a pragmatic recognition that the Empire was no longer viable and the UK’s economic, diplomatic and strategic interests were best served by joining the new Common Market – the Conservatives’ motivations for joining the EEC were still essentially non-cosmopolitan.

141. Peter Kellner, “13 wasted years?”, in Anthony Seldon and Tom Egerton (eds.), *The Conservative effect 2010-2014: 14 wasted years?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 4-36, 13.

142. Dominic Sandbrook, *Never had it so good: A history of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2005), 110.

143. Tim Bale, *The Conservatives since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36.

144. Mark Garnett and Kevin Hickson, *Conservative thinkers: The key contributors to the political thought of the modern Conservative Party* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 13-14.

Box 3.1. British Conservatism and Europe

Initially, many Conservatives were reluctant to join the EEC because of fears that it would undermine the UK's links with its former colonies, now members of the Commonwealth of Nations.

However, it was Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, who first applied for EEC membership in 1961, only to be vetoed by French President Charles de Gaulle. It was another Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, who finally brought the UK into the EEC in 1972.

There were several reasons for this shift. First, as British colonies rapidly gained their independence, the British Empire – which formally became the British Commonwealth of Nations in 1931 – diminished in political importance. This mattered, because EEC membership and Commonwealth ties were seen by contemporary politicians as binary options.¹⁴⁵ With the Empire gone and the UK's great ally, the United States, in favour of greater European integration, EEC membership was to help to maintain the UK's global standing.¹⁴⁶ Even some within the Party's right came to see EEC, the predecessor to the European Union, as the means by which the UK could, by influencing the core European states, continue to project power after the loss of its Empire.¹⁴⁷

Second, EEC membership came to be seen as economically attractive. Remaining outside the EEC, whose member economies were outgrowing that of the UK in the early sixties, was believed to limit the UK's economic potential and risked undermining its exports.¹⁴⁸

Third, for those such as Edward Heath, who had served in the Second World War, joining the EEC became seen as key to preventing the outbreak of another major conflict.¹⁴⁹

145. Sabine Lee, "Staying in the game? Coming into the game?: Macmillan and European integration", in Richard Aldous and Sabine Lee (eds.), *Harold Macmillan and Britain's world role* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 123-147, 129.

146. Hugo Young, *This blessed plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 128.

147. Kevin Hickson, *Britain's Conservative right since 1945: Traditional Toryism in a cold climate* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 67-68.

148. Hugo Young, *This blessed plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 118-119; Dominic Sandbrook, *Never had it so good: A history of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2005), 524-531.

149. Hugo Young, *This blessed plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 255.

Having initially been supportive, Conservative attitudes towards Europe gradually shifted from the eighties, driven in part by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's own increasing hostility,¹⁵⁰ but also due to unease at the growing extent of European integration and the impact this had on UK sovereignty¹⁵¹ – which spoke to the non-cosmopolitanism of British Conservatism.

This shift caused increasing divides within the Conservative Party. Thatcher's growing opposition to further European integration caused problems with her more Europhile colleagues and helped trigger her downfall in 1990. Her successor, John Major, faced growing pressure from an increasingly Eurosceptic and rebellious Conservative right, especially after the Maastricht Treaty transformed the EEC into the present-day European Union (EU).¹⁵²

The growing Eurosceptic turn came to a head when, under pressure from his Party's own right wing, and nervous about the growing popularity of Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP), Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013 pledged to hold a referendum on the UK's continued membership of the EU should the Tories win a majority at the next general election, due in 2015.¹⁵³ Having unexpectedly won such a mandate,¹⁵⁴ Cameron followed through.

Despite Cameron campaigning prominently for a 'Remain' vote, many prominent Conservatives, including Michael Gove and the future Prime Minister Boris Johnson, backed 'Leave'.¹⁵⁵ So did the UK electorate by a margin of 51.9% to 48.1%.¹⁵⁶ While the UK would not formally leave the EU until January 2020, British conservatism had permanently shifted towards Euroscepticism – a triumph of non-cosmopolitanism.

150. Ian Gilmour and Mark Garnett, *Whatever happened to the Tories? The Conservatives since 1945* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), 339-340.

151. Kevin Hickson, *Britain's Conservative right since 1945: Traditional toryism in a cold climate* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 79.

152. *Ibid.*, 74-75.

153. Tim Shipman, *All out war: The full story of Brexit* (London: William Collins, 2017), 1-11.

154. Philip Cowley and Denis Kavanah, *The British general election of 2015* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 361-162, 387.

155. David Cameron, *For the record* (London: William Collins, 2019), 656-167.

156. The Electoral Commission, "Results and turnout at the EU referendum" <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/results-and-turnout-eu-referendum> (2019).

The rise of Thatcherism, 1964-97

In common with much of the developed world, from the late sixties onwards,¹⁵⁷ the UK experienced rising inflation, declining economic growth rates and growing levels of industrial unrest. For example, during the seventies, UK inflation averaged 12%, unemployment reached a four-decade high of 5.5% and average annual GDP growth averaged 2.5%.¹⁵⁸ While those GDP numbers may appear impressive to readers in 2025, they represented a considerable fall from levels seen in the fifties and sixties.

Reflecting this, and unusually for the postwar era, the sixties and seventies UK saw regular changes of government. Having narrowly defeated the Tories under their new leader, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, who succeeded Harold Macmillan in 1963, the new Labour leader, Harold Wilson, secured a large majority in 1966. Yet, just four years later, in 1970, he unexpectedly lost to Edward Heath's Conservatives, having been damaged by the forced devaluation of the pound sterling and having failed to live up to promises of transformative change.¹⁵⁹

Unfortunately for the Conservatives, deteriorating conditions wreaked havoc on the 1970-74 Heath Government. Reflecting British Conservatives' growing preference for economic liberalism, Heath initially ran on a platform of industrial relations reform, abandoning price controls and reducing taxes.¹⁶⁰ Confronted with industrial unrest, bankruptcies and rising unemployment, however, Heath performed a series of policy u-turns.¹⁶¹ Unfortunately for him, these attempts at pragmatism backfired. Industrial relations reforms crumbled under pressure from trade unions,¹⁶² with failing companies, including the

157. Thomas Weston, "The UK economy in the 1960s", <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/the-uk-economy-in-the-1960s/> (2024).

158. Duncan Weldon, *Two hundred years of muddling through: The surprising story of Britain's economy from boom to bust and back again* (London: Little Brown, 2021), 231-232.

159. Dominic Sandbrook, *White heat: A history of Britain in the swinging sixties* (London: Abacus, 2007), 784-5.

160. Tim Bale, *The Conservatives since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 125-126.

161. Adrian Williamson, *Conservative economic policymaking and the birth of Thatcherism, 1964-1979* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 36-43; Bale, *The Conservatives since 1945*, 160-164.

162. Adrian Williamson, *Conservative economic policymaking and the birth of Thatcherism, 1964-1979* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 174-177.

famous engine and automotive manufacturer Rolls-Royce, nationalised, and price controls and incomes policy reintroduced.¹⁶³

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when Heath went back to the polls in February 1974, he lost the election. The Tories were narrowly eclipsed by Labour, still led by Harold Wilson, as the largest party in the Commons, and went further backwards at the subsequent election that October.¹⁶⁴

Growing discontent with the state of the UK economy and the traumatic end of the Heath Government prompted arguably the greatest shift in Conservative philosophy in the twentieth century. While voices within the Conservative Party calling for greater economic liberalism had been growing louder since the sixties,¹⁶⁵ they gained ascendancy only after Margaret Thatcher assumed the Party leadership in 1975. While there are debates as to when exactly what became known as ‘Thatcherism’ emerged,¹⁶⁶ for the first time in their history, Conservatives actively sought to reduce the size of the state. Economic liberalism – specifically, limiting the state – became the key tenet of the UK centre-right in that period.

Thatcher was handed the opportunity to reshape the UK at the 1979 general election, which was followed by further election victories in 1983 and 1987.¹⁶⁷ The economy was transformed under Thatcher’s premiership in a more economically liberal direction. Reflecting a longstanding Conservative preference for private property, the nationalised industries were gradually disposed of, with some £33 billion in public assets sold off between 1979 and 1990,¹⁶⁸ trade union power was broken and financial markets were deregulated. Additionally,

163. Bale, *The Conservatives since 1945*, 160–162.

164. Roger Mortimore and Andrew Block (eds.), *Butler’s British political facts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 380.

165. Ewen Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 227–230.

166. Adrian Williamson, *Conservative economic policymaking and the birth of Thatcherism, 1964–1979* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

167. Roger Mortimore and Andrew Block (eds.), *Butler’s British political facts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 381.

168. Leslie Hannah, “The State ownership of industry”, in Roderick Ford and Paul Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge economic history of modern Britain: Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 98.

income tax rates for the top band fell from 83% to 40%.¹⁶⁹ None of these major reforms were abandoned by subsequent Labour governments, leading to Thatcher herself describing the later Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, as her greatest achievement.¹⁷⁰

Thatcher's most significant reforms were around housing. To boost home ownership and once again reflecting a longstanding conservative preference for expanding private property ownership, tenants in council houses were given the opportunity to buy their homes for a substantial discount, up to 70% of a property's value – a policy known as 'Right to Buy'.¹⁷¹ During Thatcher's premiership, over 1.5 million homes were sold off, which helped to increase the proportion of owner-occupiers to 70%, up from 57% in 1980.¹⁷² Further reflecting the push away from state towards private property ownership, there was no obligation for the proceeds of council house sales to be used to construct new council homes.¹⁷³ As a result, council housebuilding all but collapsed – completions fell from 145,600 in 1975 to just 1,900 by 1995.¹⁷⁴

There has been considerable debate as to whether Thatcher's approach to the economy, and her embrace of economic liberalism, was even conservative at all. Thatcher's Tory critics described her ideas as rooted in nineteenth-century Gladstonian liberalism rather than conservatism.¹⁷⁵ The Oxford academic John Gray, for example, lamented "[t]he capture of conservative parties and governments throughout the Western world by free market ideology".¹⁷⁶

However, the shift in Conservative thinking was perhaps more

169. Duncan Weldon, *Two hundred years of muddling through: The surprising story of Britain's economy from boom to bust and back again* (London: Little Brown, 2021), 258-261.

170. Conor Burns, "Margaret Thatcher's greatest achievement: New Labour", <https://conservativehome.blogs.com/centreriht/2008/04/making-history.html> (2008).

171. Rodney Lowe, *The welfare state in Britain since 1945* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 366.

172. Liam Halligan, *Home Truths: The UK's chronic housing shortage* (London: Biteback, 2021), 222-224.

173. Frank Eardley, "Right to buy: Past, present and future", <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/right-to-buy-past-present-and-future/> (2022).

174. Rodney Lowe, *The welfare state in Britain since 1945* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 367.

175. Ewen Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 257.

176. John Gray, "The undoing of conservatism", https://archive.org/details/isbn_1874097453/page/34/mode/2up (1994).

gradual and incremental than sometimes claimed. Unlike her ill-fated successor, Liz Truss,¹⁷⁷ Prime Minister from September until October 2022, Thatcher proceeded carefully. She was, for example, “immensely cautious” about the pace and extent of privatising state-owned assets.¹⁷⁸ Indeed, some of the major privatisations, such as the railways, only took place under her successor, John Major.¹⁷⁹ Even the efforts at state shrinkage are possibly exaggerated – the UK’s tax revenue “continued to hover around the 40 per cent mark” during the Thatcher and Major years, albeit aided by revenue from North Sea oil and gas.¹⁸⁰ This showed that pragmatism was still shaping British Conservatism during this period.

Having succeeded Margaret Thatcher in 1990, John Major unexpectedly won a narrow majority at the 1992 general election. Yet, with Labour now united under a charismatic new leader, Tony Blair, conservatism lost its hold over government. The Tories were trounced at the 1997 general election, losing more than half their seats.¹⁸¹

In and out of the wilderness, 1997-2024

The Tory recovery from the 1997 election defeat was long and painful, with Labour winning another huge majority at the 2001 general election and the Conservatives picking up just one additional seat.¹⁸² While the Tories recovered ground at the 2005 election under Michael Howard, gaining 33 new seats, their public vote share only increased by half a percentage point.¹⁸³

177. Ben Clift, “Liz Truss’s mini-budget looms large in the election campaign – here’s why it was such a disaster”, <https://theconversation.com/liz-truss-mini-budget-looms-large-in-the-election-campaign-heres-why-it-was-such-a-disaster-231417> (2024).

178. Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher the authorized biography: Volume two: Everything she wants* (London: Penguin, 2016), 37.

179. John Stittle, “Nationalising Britain’s railways is the only way to fix chronic problems – here’s why”, <https://theconversation.com/nationalising-britains-railways-is-the-only-way-to-fix-chronic-problems-heres-why-88591> (2018). For a timeline of privatisations in the UK, see Roger Mortimore and Andrew Block (eds.), *Butler’s British political facts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 686-89.

180. Duncan Weldon, *Two hundred years of muddling through: The surprising story of Britain’s economy from boom to bust and back again* (London: Little Brown, 2021), 261.

181. Tim Bale, *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron* (London: Polity, 2019), 67.

182. David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British general election of 2001* (Houndmills: Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 251.

183. *Ibid.*, 196, 235.

While not the only factor,¹⁸⁴ Blair's acceptance of the Thatcherite economic inheritance also helped push the Conservatives away from the political centre ground, which they had traditionally seen as their own¹⁸⁵ and which helped to erode a political identity clearly distinct from Labour.

Only in 2010, under new leader, David Cameron, did the Conservatives once again become the largest party in the House of Commons. Having fallen short of an outright majority at the May 2010 general election, however, they were forced to form a government in coalition with the Liberal Democrats.¹⁸⁶

Under the Cameron-led Governments (2010-16, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats until 2015), the Conservatives focused on trying to steady public finances, with the reduction of welfare expenditure a key aspect of this. Accordingly, government spending fell by 5% of GDP during the Coalition years. These spending reductions were "one the biggest reductions" of the postwar era for any UK government.¹⁸⁷ This reflected the importance Conservatives have recently placed on limiting the size of the state. Economic liberalism continued to be the prevailing tenet of the British Conservatives in the twenty-first century.

It should also be pointed out that the spending cuts were not universal. Political realities and electoral pragmatism, namely the Conservative Party's increasing reliance on older voters saw to that. Most significantly, the so-called 'triple lock' to state pensions was introduced. According to this formula, old-age pensions would increase by whichever was the highest out of the inflation rate, earnings growth

184. Daniel Harari, "Low growth: The economy's biggest challenge", <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/low-growth-the-economys-biggest-challenge/> (2024).

185. Andrew Gamble, "New Labour and Political Change", *Parliamentary Affairs* (2010), 639-52.

186. For the 2010 general election, see Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British general election of 2010* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

187. Paul Johnson, Carl Emmerson and Nick Ridpath, "The economy", in Anthony Seldon and Tom Egerton (eds.), *The Conservative effect 2010-2014: 14 wasted years?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 71-101, 87-88.

or 2.5%.¹⁸⁸ While this has served its purpose of helping reverse the long-term decline in the value of the state pension relative to average annual earnings, increasing it from 17% in 2010 to 19% in 2022,¹⁸⁹ concerns around its long-term fiscal viability remain, as elaborated on later in this Chapter.¹⁹⁰

However, recognising the political need to embrace social reform and reflecting the conservative preference for these not to be solely provided by the state, local organisations would be encouraged to play a larger role, an approach Cameron referred to as the ‘Big Society’.¹⁹¹ In practice, however, there was confusion about what the ‘Big Society’ meant, and even some Conservatives were publicly sceptical that it could work in tandem with deficit reduction, which dominated Conservative policymaking in this period.¹⁹²

As well as cuts to public spending, Cameron also embarked on major reforms to the NHS, welfare payments and education. For example, accelerating a process begun under Blair, schools were increasingly set up or taken out of local authority control. Instead, they were given financial incentives to become free schools or academies, that is, schools operating either autonomously or as part of an autonomous grouping called a multi-academy trust (MAT). Thus, the number of academies increased from just 203 in 2010 to 10,176 by 2023.¹⁹³ Their impact on educational outcomes, however, remains disputed.¹⁹⁴

Cameron’s successor as Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister, Theresa May (2016-2019), embarked on a notable rhetorical shift

188. Peter Dorey and Mark Garnett, *The British Coalition Government, 2010-2015: A marriage of inconvenience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 161.

189. Frank Hobson, Rachael Harker and Esme Kirk Wade, “Research briefing: State Pension triple lock”, House of Commons Library, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7812/CBP-7812.pdf> (2023), 18-19.

190. Ben Quinn, “William Hague calls for end to ‘runaway train’ of pension triple lock”, *The Guardian*, 12 September 2023.

191. Peter Dorey and Mark Garnett, *The British Coalition Government, 2010-2015: A marriage of inconvenience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 142.

192. Ben Williams, *The Evolution of Conservative Party Social Policy* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 108-9, 119.

193. Alan Smithers, “Education”, Anthony Seldon and Tom Egerton (eds.), *The Conservative effect 2010-2014: 14 wasted years?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 157-204, 166.

194. Emily Haves, “Education: multi-academy trusts”, House of Lords Library, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/education-multi-academy-trusts/> (2022).

from her predecessor. Informed by her interpretation of the Brexit referendum result, Theresa May proclaimed the “end of austerity” and tried to emphasise cautious social reform, in particular her mission to tackle “some of the burning injustices that undermine the solidarity of our society”.¹⁹⁵

Unfortunately for May, however, her attempts to leave any sort of policy legacy, other than the legally binding target to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050¹⁹⁶ were undermined by a combination of her inability to get a Brexit withdrawal agreement through Parliament and her ill-advised 2017 election gambit, which saw the Conservatives lose their Commons majority.¹⁹⁷ Having failed to see her Brexit deal through the Commons, May’s premiership ultimately crumbled in July 2019.

Under her successor, Prime Minister Boris Johnson (2019-2022), who won a substantial majority (81 seats) at the 2019 election,¹⁹⁸ conservative pragmatism once again came to the fore. For example, Johnson also presided over a temporary massive expansion of the state during the COVID-19 pandemic. To meet the challenges it created, government borrowing reached 17% of GDP, a level without precedent outside wartime.¹⁹⁹ Like earlier periods of Conservative intervention in the economy, however, this was designed not to expand the state for its own sake, but out of practical necessity: to prevent economic meltdown in light of lockdown measures.²⁰⁰

While Johnson’s premiership collapsed in July 2022, this was due to personal and personnel failings – notably anger at breaches of lockdown

195. Theresa May, ‘I’m Determined to Build the Shared Society for All’, *The Telegraph*, 8 January 2017, p. 17; Joe Watts, “Conservative conference: Theresa May declares ‘end of austerity’ with boost to new homes as she tries to move past Brexit squabbling”, *The Independent*, 3 October 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-speech-conservative-conference-end-austerity-brexit-housing-a8566891.html>.

196. Peter Walker, Rowena Mason and Damian Carrington, “Theresa May commits to net zero UK carbon emissions by 2050”, *The Guardian*, 11 June 2019.

197. For the May Government, see Anthony Seldon, *May at 10: The verdict* (London: Biteback, 2019).

198. House of Commons Library, “General election 2019: The results”, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/general-election-2019-the-results-so-far/> (2019).

199. Johnson, Emmerson and Ridpath, “The economy”, 93.

200. Conservative Party, Boris Johnson Unveils a New Deal for Britain,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210516024522/https://www.conservatives.com/news/boris-johnson-unveils-a-new-deal-for-britain> (2020).

rules by No 10 staff, his evasions about these and the mishandling of a scandal involving a government whip – rather than discontent over the Conservative Party’s philosophical direction.²⁰¹

Under the subsequent brief but disastrous premiership of Liz Truss, the Conservatives briefly pivoted again, abandoning any sense of pragmatism in favour of a much more libertarian approach. Her Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng’s mini budget included £45 billion in unfunded tax cuts, equivalent to 2% of UK GDP, in the hope that this would stimulate the UK’s moribund economy, which has stagnated in per capita terms since the 2008 global financial crisis.²⁰² Unfortunately, this in part triggered a market panic, with the pound falling to record lows, government borrowing costs increasing by one percentage point and the Bank of England being forced to step in to stabilise pension funds.²⁰³ Consequently, Truss was forced to resign in October 2022 after only one month in office.

Her successor, Rishi Sunak, once again pivoted towards a more pragmatic approach to the economy, and the markets steadied. However, while economic growth picked up towards the end of Sunak’s premiership, with quarterly GDP growth hitting 0.5%,²⁰⁴ it was too little too late.

In this context, it was not surprising that the Conservatives were handed their worst-ever defeat at July 2024’s UK general election,²⁰⁵ winning just 23.7% of the vote.²⁰⁶

201. Eleni Courea, Matt Honeycombe-Foster and Emilio Casalicchio, “Boris Johnson resigns as UK prime minister”, Politico, <https://www.politico.eu/article/boris-johnson-to-resign-as-uk-prime-minister/> (2022); Henry Zeffman et al, “Quit now, critics urge Johnson as Tory leadership race begins”, *The Times*, 7 July 2022, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/boris-johnson-resigns-as-prime-minister-follow-live-dc5ql9xrr>

202. Emmerson, Johnson and Ridpath, “The Economy”, 73.

203. *Ibid.*, 95.

204. “How fast is the UK’s economy growing and what is GDP?”, BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-13200758> (2024).

205. George Parker, “Keir Starmer hails historic Labour victory as Conservatives sink to worst-ever result”, *Financial Times*, 5 July 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/856c2d0b-a60e-4359-8e2c-285a59dbfc92>.

206. “UK General election 2024 Results”, BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2024/uk/results> (2024).

Contemporary challenges

Having traced the core tenets and evolution of British conservatism, several major challenges present themselves today for the survival of British Conservatism: the rise of anti-establishment sentiment, the growth of the populist right, the perceived loss of the Conservative Party's reputation for competence, and a collapse in support among the young.

Rise of anti-establishment sentiment

First, as mentioned earlier, support for anti-establishment forces has been rising and, reflecting this, the combined vote share for the traditional forces of centre-left and centre-right, the Labour and Conservative parties, has steadily declined since the fifties. It fell from an average of 90% of the vote at general elections between 1945 and 1970 to just 65% in 2010. While the two Brexit-era elections, 2017 and 2019, marked a temporary reversal of this trend,²⁰⁷ the 2024 general election saw Labour and the Conservatives win their lowest-ever combined vote share: just 57%.²⁰⁸ Moreover, there are no signs of this trend reversing, with polls from early May 2025 still showing the combined Labour/Conservative vote falling below 45%.²⁰⁹

This is a symptom of an increasing dissatisfaction with a political centre that appears unable to resolve the UK's structural problems, specifically stagnant growth and living standards. One poll for UK in a Changing Europe, conducted in April 2024, found that just under a third of British voters "do not feel represented by any of the main parties".²¹⁰ After years of economic stagnation and growing concerns about the deteriorating state of public services, many voters simply no longer feel that either the traditional centre-left or centre-right has the

207. Paul Webb, "The realigning party system", in Anthony Seldon and Tom Egerton (eds.), *The Conservative effect 2010-2014: 14 wasted years?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 446-65, 449-50.

208. Election 2024 Results", BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2024/uk/regions/N92000002> (2024).

209. Politico, "Poll of polls", <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/united-kingdom/> (2025).

210. Stephanie Luke, "Do UK voters feel represented by the major parties?", UK in a Changing Europe, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/do-uk-voters-feel-represented-by-the-major-parties/>.

ideas to turn the situation around.²¹¹

Worse, the differences between the centre-left and centre-right, as represented by the two major parties, are sometimes hard for disillusioned voters to ascertain. Indeed, David Cameron once famously described himself as the “heir to Blair”.²¹² Both centre-left and centre-right governments, for example, have presided over large increases in annual net migration, from less than 100,000 in the nineties²¹³ to 906,000 in 2023,²¹⁴ despite repeatedly pledging to reduce it. Thus, according to September, 2024 polling from YouGov, although only a quarter of overall British voters thought that Labour and the Conservatives were similar, that number rose to 41% of 2024 Reform UK voters; the most disestablishmentarian of the UK’s current successful political parties.²¹⁵ Since the start of 2025, the right-wing populist Reform Party has been polling within three percentage points of both the traditional forces of the centre-left and the centre-right.²¹⁶

However, not only are anti-establishment parties in the UK winning more votes, but they are also learning how to work the electoral system to their advantage. Until relatively recently, the inability of anti-establishment parties to concentrate their votes geographically meant that even substantial shares of the vote translated into relatively paltry numbers of seats. For example, while the Liberal Democrats secured 23% of the vote at the 2010 general election, this translated into less than 9% of Commons seats.²¹⁷ At the 2024 general election, however, while the Liberal Democrats’ vote share was just 12%, they managed to

211. Luke, “Do UK voters feel represented.”

212. Brian Wheeler, “The David Cameron story”, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2015-32592449> (2015).

213. Office for National Statistics, “International migration: a recent history”, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/internationalmigrationarecenthistory/2015-01-15> (2015).

214. Rajeev Syal, “Net migration to UK hit record high of 906,000 in year to June 2023, revised figures show”, *The Guardian*, 28 November 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/nov/28/net-migration-hit-record-high-of-906000-in-year-to-june-2023-revised-figures-show>.

215. Dylan Difford, “How similar do Britons think the main parties are?”, YouGov, <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50430-how-similar-do-britons-think-the-main-parties-are> (2024).

216. See, for example, YouGov, “Voting intention: Lab 24%, Ref 25%, Con 21% (2-3 Feb 2025)”, <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/51511-voting-intention-lab-24-ref-25-con-21-2-3-feb-2025> (2025).

217. Electoral Reform Society, “2010 General Election Results”, <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/2010-general-election-results/> (2010).

translate this into 11% of Commons seats.²¹⁸ A large part of the reason for this was that, unlike in previous elections, the Liberal Democrats decided to focus heavily on local issues, such as river pollution, rather than national ones.²¹⁹ The Liberal Democrats are not the only minor party improving their seat targeting. The 2024 general election saw the Greens and Reform UK win four and five Commons seats respectively.²²⁰

While this represents a threat to the centre-left and centre-right, the Conservative Party and, by extension, the UK centre-right, have been especially badly hit. Of the 64 Liberal Democrat gains at the 2024 general election, for instance, some 60 were from the Conservatives.²²¹ With no other mainstream centre-right party on offer, unless the Conservatives can reclaim these seats, the path back to government for the centre-right will be a narrow one.

Growth of the populist right vote

The growth in anti-establishment sentiment has also in part led to the rise of right-wing populism, which has further divided the UK centre-right politically.

From the collapse of the Liberal Party after the First World War until quite recently,²²² the relative political unity of the British centre-right through the Conservative Party compared to the British centre-left greatly aided its success. While the right-of-centre vote consolidated behind the Conservative Party, the left-of-centre vote was divided between Labour and the Liberals/Alliance/Liberal Democrats. The results could be dramatic. At the 1983 general election, for example, the centre-left, as represented by the Labour Party and the Liberal/

218. Electoral Reform Society, "Jubilation and strong support for electoral reform at the Liberal Democrat's 2024 conference", <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/jubilation-and-strong-support-for-electoral-reform-the-liberal-democrats-2024-conference/> (2024).

219. Sophie Church, "How the Lib Dems rose from the ashes", Politics Home, <https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/how-lib-dems-rose-from-the-ashes> (2024).

220. House of Commons Library, "2024 general election: Performance of Reform and the Greens", <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/2024-general-election-performance-of-reform-and-the-greens/> (2024).

221. BBC News, "General election 2024 in maps and charts", <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4nglege1o> (2024).

222. For the collapse of the Liberal Party, see Trevor Wilson, *The downfall of the Liberal Party* (London: Collins, 1966).

SDP Alliance, won a combined 53% of the vote while the centre-right, as represented by the Conservatives, won just 42%. This unity greatly aided the centre-right – the Conservatives won 397 seats compared to Labour's 209 and the Alliance's 23.²²³

The growth of the populist right, especially Nigel Farage's various political outfits (UKIP and now Reform UK), however, presents a new risk to the traditional UK centre-right by splitting the right-of-centre vote.

Initially, this new populist right centred around Euroscepticism. As mentioned earlier, fears about growing support for the UKIP, which secured 12.6% of the vote in the 2015 general election,²²⁴ was a key reason behind David Cameron's decision to call the 2016 Brexit referendum. While UKIP support collapsed following the referendum, falling to just 1.8% at the 2017 general election,²²⁵ the populist threat surged once again as Theresa May's Brexit difficulties mounted. Accordingly, in 2019, Farage's newly created Brexit Party won the 2019 UK European Parliament elections, winning 31.6% of the vote to the Tories' 9.1%.²²⁶

While Boris Johnson's assumption of the Tory leadership, delivery of Brexit and the 2019 election victory appeared to kill its momentum and restore the political unity of the UK centre-right – the Brexit Party, the predecessor to the Reform Party, even withdrew its candidates standing against Tory incumbents at the 2019 general election²²⁷ – renewed Tory difficulties once again opened the door to Farage.

Farage's decision to re-enter the political fray and his decision to take on the Conservatives at the 2024 election demonstrates the enduring appeal of the populist right post-Brexit. Instead of Europe, this time

223. David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British general election of 1983* (London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), 289-91, 299.

224. "Election 2015: Results", BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015/results> (2015).

225. Philo Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British general election of 2017* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 472-5.

226. BBC News, "The UK's European elections 2019", <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/crjeqkdevwvt/the-uk-european-elections-2019> (2019).

227. Ford et al, *British general election of 2019*, 470.

Reform focused its attacks on high levels of immigration. Significantly, Reform UK's capture of five House of Commons seats was the first time a Farage-led party had ever gained seats at a general election.²²⁸ Worse still, by splitting the right-wing vote, Farage's intervention arguably cost the Conservatives up to 80 further seats.²²⁹

As well as directly affecting the Tories' ability to win seats, this success has prompted calls from within the Conservative Party to embrace the policies of Reform UK, especially following the recent general election.²³⁰ However, there is little evidence that embracing Reform-type policies, such as taking a tougher stance on immigration, has aided centre-right parties elsewhere.²³¹ It is also difficult to see how any drift to the populist right will help the Tories regain the trust of centrist former conservatives,²³² including those who recently delivered 60 Tory seats to the Liberal Democrats.

Indeed, according to projections by the pollster More in Common from the autumn of 2024, a political strategy aimed at winning over Reform voters would lead to fewer Conservative seats than either a strategy that focuses on winning over Liberal Democrat voters or that tries to moderate between the two; Reform voters are the least willing, of the voters of all major UK parties, to switch to the Conservatives. That said, to win a solid parliamentary majority, the Conservatives will still need to win back support from at least some Reform voters.²³³

228. Iona Stewart, "2024 general election: Performance of Reform and the Greens", <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/2024-general-election-performance-of-reform-and-the-greens/> (2024).

229. Ollie Corfe, "Revealed: The real extent of Reform's damage to the Tories", *The Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/07/06/the-true-cost-of-reform-conservative-election-result/> (2024).

230. See e.g. Paul Seddon, Ben Wright, "Tories must win back Reform UK voters – Braverman", <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cw4y7ewedg1o> (2024); Gabrielle Wilde, "'Tories should embrace Nigel Farage and Reform UK', says Craig Mackinlay", GB News, <https://www.gbnews.com/politics/video-craig-mackinlay-nigel-farage-reform> (2024).

231. Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "The Mainstream Right in Western Europe in the Twenty-First Century", in Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Riding the populist wave: Europe's mainstream right in crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 290-314, 306-7.

232. Timothy Kirkhope, "The Conservative party has shifted too far to the right. We must fight for the centre ground", *The Guardian*, 10 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/10/conservative-party-shifted-right-centre-ground>.

233. More in Common, "Conservative comeback: Is there a path back to power by 2029?", https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/ut1lem13/7_conservative-coalition-website.pdf (2024).

Perceived lack of competence

Thanks to numerous policy failures under recent Conservative Party governments, the UK centre-right's reputation for competence, once a key ingredient for its success, has been severely eroded.

The state of the UK after 14 years of government by the centre-right's leading vehicle, the Conservative Party, did not cast its reputation in a positive light. Annual GDP growth, which had averaged 3% between 1993 and 2007, sank to just 1.5% between 2009 and 2023.²³⁴ Worse still, the tax burden had reached record highs, projected to reach 38% of GDP by 2028-29,²³⁵ while public debt looked set to reach 270% by the 2070s without significant policy change.²³⁶ Public services also were felt to be in a state of disorder – YouGov polling before the 2024 election found that over 80% of Britons thought that public services were “in a bad state”.²³⁷ Additionally, despite repeatedly promising to lower net migration,²³⁸ it rose from 244,000 in the year ending June 2010 to a record 906,000 in the year ending June 2023.²³⁹

It did not help that sudden philosophical shifts under successive Conservative Prime Ministers have hardly made for consistent policymaking and failed to project any long-term vision. For instance, between 2010 and 2024 the Government veered from austerity under David Cameron to an emphasis on greater state expenditure under Boris Johnson.²⁴⁰ The rapid churn of ministers did not help either — there were 16 housing ministers alone between 2010 and 2024.²⁴¹

234. Daniel Harari, “Low growth: The economy's biggest challenge”, House of Commons Library, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/low-growth-the-economy-s-biggest-challenge/> (2024).

235. Delphine Strauss, “UK tax burden to hit record high regardless of Budget, analysis finds”, *Financial Times*, 27 February 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/ec845f58-890a-4e48-99df-2993b92bb37a>.

236. Office for Budget Responsibility, “Public debt projected to exceed 270 per cent of GDP by the mid-2070s”, <https://obr.uk/public-debt-projected-to-exceed-270-per-cent-of-gdp-by-the-mid-2070s/> (2924).

237. Christien Pheby and Matthew Smith, “General election 2024: 84% of Britons say public services are in poor shape”, YouGov, <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/49851-general-election-2024-84-of-britons-say-public-services-are-in-poor-shape> (2024).

238. “Tories would limit immigration to ‘tens of thousands’ a year, says Cameron”, *The Guardian*, 11 January 2010.

239. Office for National Statistics, “Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2024”, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingjune2024> (2024).

240. Tim Pitt, “A renewed agenda for Conservative economics”, in David Gauke (ed.), *The case for the centre right* (London: Polity Press, 2023), 103-124, 105.

241. Sky News, “16 housing ministers in 13 years – has it stopped the job getting done?”, <https://news.sky.com/story/16-housing-ministers-in-13-years-has-it-stopped-the-job-getting-done-13008296> (2023).

Given the failings of recent years, it is hardly surprising that even many traditional centre-right voters no longer feel drawn to the Conservative Party. More in Common polling from autumn 2024 estimated that more than one million 2019 Conservative voters did not vote at all in 2024; almost double the number who switched to Labour. Such was the level of disapproval that, for over three-quarters of them, it was the first time they had abstained at a general election.²⁴²

Even amidst the gloom, however, not everything appears lost. While the Conservative Party's brand remains severely damaged, the centre-right is still associated with competence and stability. The same More in Common polling also found that voters believe the Conservatives, "at their best ... create economic stability ... always put Britain's interests first" and "maintain law and order".²⁴³ While the Conservative brand has been damaged recently, there is some reason to hope that, by adopting a credible and consistent policy response, the centre-right can try to re-establish itself.

Collapsing support among the young

An ageing voter base means that the British centre-right faces long-term extinction unless it can once again appeal to younger voters. According to a 2024 YouGov survey, the only age group where the Tories outpolled Labour was among the over-65s.²⁴⁴ Worse, just 8% of 18-24 and 25-29 year olds voted Conservative in 2024. That number only rose to 12% of 30-39-year-olds and 17% of 40-49-year-olds. Seeing little on offer from the centre-right, younger people have instead turned to the left – some three-quarters of 18-24-year-olds voted for left or centre-left parties.²⁴⁵

A large part of the reason for this growing disillusionment with the centre-right relates to the increased difficulties younger voters face in

242. More in Common, "Conservative comeback?"

243. Ibid.

244. Stuart Fox, "Young people led surge for smaller parties but no Reform 'youthquake', says UK election survey", *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/young-people-led-surge-for-smaller-parties-but-no-reform-youthquake-says-uk-election-survey-234394> (2024).

245. Adam McDonnell, "How Britain voted in the 2024 general election", YouGov, <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/49978-how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-general-election> (2024).

acquiring assets and starting families.²⁴⁶ Soaring house prices have put dreams of home ownership and starting families out of reach for many. Thus, the rate of homeownership among 25-34-year-olds plunged from 55% in 1997 to just 35% in 2017.²⁴⁷ At the same time, average house prices increased by 173% in real terms between 1997 and 2024, and by 253% in London within the same timeframe.²⁴⁸ This is especially significant since home ownership has long been associated with voting Conservative.²⁴⁹ For example, after the 2019 general election, just three Tory-held seats had “home ownership rates below 50 per cent”.²⁵⁰

Making matters worse, these pressures have had a direct impact on family formation. For example, one 2024 UCL study of 7,200 millennials found that, of the 40% who wanted to have their first or a subsequent child, just 25% were trying to conceive. While not the only factor, around 30% of that group cited financial pressures as a reason for not attempting to do so.²⁵¹ Partly reflecting this, the birth rate fell to just 1.49 children per woman in 2022, well below the replacement rate of 2.1.²⁵²

While individuals within the British centre-right have attempted to address some of these problems, they have made little headway. For instance, while the former Conservative Government attempted to liberalise the planning system – most notably under Robert Jenrick during his term as Housing Secretary in 2020 – these collapsed under pressure from Conservative MPs and activists.²⁵³ This matters because,

246. Geraldine Scott, “Reform picking up younger voters faster than us, new Tory MPs warn”, *The Times*, 30 September 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/reform-younger-voters-conservative-election-mps-p90sdtjx0>.

247. House of Lords Library, “Housing needs of young people”, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/housing-needs-of-young-people/> (2024).

248. *Ibid.*

249. George Eaton, “How Tory dominance is built on home ownership”, *New Statesman*, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2021/05/how-tory-dominance-built-home-ownership> (2021).

250. *Ibid.*

251. UCL, “Only a quarter of millennials who want children are trying for them”, <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/only-a-quarter-of-millennials-who-want-children-are-trying-for-them/> (2024).

252. Heather Stewart, “Birthrate in UK falls to record low as campaigners say ‘procreation a luxury’”, *The Guardian*, 23 February 2024.

253. Andy Gregory, “Government poised to water down ‘radical and necessary’ overhaul of England’s planning system, report suggests”, *Independent*, 10 September 2021, <https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/politics/housing-planning-laws-reform-jenrick-b1918243.html>.

without planning reform, it will be difficult to build the new homes to address the UK's housing shortage and, in doing so, ensuring that younger voters have access to affordable homes.

Conclusion

This Chapter examined the recent history of the UK centre-right, focusing on its main vehicle: the Conservative Party. From that, it drew lessons for the Conservative Party of today. The next Chapter considers the centre-right in France, where, over the decades, the centre-right has failed to maintain a single and united political party to rally behind, unlike in the UK.

Chapter Four: The centre-right in France

Having defined and described the evolution of the centre-right in the UK in the last Chapter, this Chapter will define the French centre-right, identifying its parties and key tenets. It will then unpack the centre-right's post-war history, exploring these tenets' long-term role and evolution. Finally, it will assess the core challenges that have weakened the centre-right and which continue to threaten its political fortunes going forward.

What is the French centre-right?

Parties and traditions

Widely labelled “the most idiotic right in the world,” the French right has a history of chronic division.²⁵⁴ This track record is readily illustrated by the long-standing historiographical tendency to title works on this topic in the plural, looking at the French ‘rights’ rather than a single ‘right.’²⁵⁵ Such heterogeneity complicates the process of

254. This term was first coined by former Prime Minister Guy Mollet in 1957 (Guy Mollet, “la droite française est la plus bête du monde”, *Le Monde*, 10 December 1957, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1957/12/10/m-guy-mollet-la-droite-francaise-est-la-plus-bete-du-monde_2337012_1819218.html), and since popularised by historian Philippe Vasseur in 1988 (Philippe Vasseur, *La droite la plus bête du monde ?* (Paris: P Belfond, 1988)); This quotation is translated from the original French by the author, as is the case for all subsequent French quotations, excluding individual names and terms left in French and printed in italics, translations of which are provided in footnotes.

255. For example see René Rémond, *Les droites en France* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1982), Jean-François Sirinelli (ed.), *Histoire des droites en France*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) and Jean Vavasseur-Desperriers, *Les droites en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009).

identifying a clear centre-right tradition, as this political grouping has morphed significantly over the post-war era, spanning a wide range of parties, fragmentations and unions.

This task is further complicated by the complex history of the terms *droite*²⁵⁶ and *centre-droit*²⁵⁷ in France. Until recent years, French right-wing politicians would seldom brand themselves as such because the right was heavily implicated in and tarnished by the collaborationist Vichy regime of 1940 to 1944.²⁵⁸ In the post-war context, the term *droite* was therefore typically only claimed by far-right groups.²⁵⁹ Instead, French centre-right and Christian democratic parties regularly branded themselves as centrist.²⁶⁰ Charles De Gaulle, who served as President between 1958 and 1969, was the foremost example of this, attempting to situate himself above the left-right divide despite clear right-leaning sympathies.²⁶¹ Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the President between 1974 and 1981, later adopted this same approach, stating that “France wishes to be governed from the centre.”²⁶² Such tendencies created a form of pseudo-centrism that would earn ridicule from socialist opponents such as François Mitterrand, the socialist President between 1981 and 1995, who once famously joked that, in France, “the centre is neither to the left, nor to the right.”²⁶³ This situation began to change in 2007 with Nicolas Sarkozy, the President between 2007 and 2012, who readily embraced his right-wing credentials.²⁶⁴ However, the problem of pseudo-centrism remains, with the persistence of nominally centrist movements –

256. *Droite*: Right.

257. *Centre-droit*: Centre-right.

258. Andrew Knapp, *Parties and the Party System in France: A Disconnected Democracy?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 202.

259. “Le conservatisme peut-il s’épanouir en France ?”, Radio France, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/en-quete-de-politique/en-quete-de-politique-du-samedi-25-fevrier-2023-4667101> (2023).

260. *Ibid.*

261. Peter Fysh, “Gaullism and Liberalism”, in Christopher Flood and Laurence Bell (eds.), *Political Ideologies in Contemporary France* (London: Pinter, 1997), 73–102 (86).

262. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Interview sur l'avenir de la société française après la parution de “*Démocratie Française*”, 14 October 1976, <https://www.elysee.fr/valery-giscard-d-estaing/1976/10/14/interview-de-m-valery-giscard-destaing-dans-le-cadre-de-lemission-levenement-le-14-octobre-1976-sur-lavenir-de-la-societe-francaise-apres-la-parution-de-democratie-francaise>.

263. Margot Bonnéry and Aurélien Soucheyre, “« François Bayrou est une girouette » : pourquoi le centrisme est une imposture politique”, *L'Humanité*, 21 January 2025, <https://www.humanite.fr/politique/andre-chassaigne/francois-bayrou-est-une-girouette-pourquoi-le-centrisme-est-une-imposture-politique>.

264. Michel Winock, *La Droite: hier et aujourd'hui* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), 184.

notably under the current President Emmanuel Macron – that reject the centre-right label but clearly reflect many of its identifying features.

Therefore, despite the persistent existence of a French centre-right, its disparate, complex nature means that it has rarely been labelled as such. This report will thus seek to identify the broader, diasporic centre-right in France, spanning the range of political parties connected to the European centre-right values outlined in Chapter Two. Below follows an outline of the current parties and traditions that we will consider within this framework.

The first natural focal point is the mainstream French centre-right tradition currently embodied by *Les Républicains*²⁶⁵ (LR), known as the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*²⁶⁶ (UMP) between 2002 and 2015. At its formation, the UMP succeeded in uniting most of the competing factions and movements of the French centre-right under a broad umbrella, generally advocating for a market-oriented economic policy with a role for the state, traditional conservative social values, and an approach to immigration that emphasised control and integration – a stance which runs true to the present.

In the legislative elections of 2002, Jacques Chirac, who served as President between 1995 and 2007, led the UMP to a majority of 398 out of the 577 seats in the National Assembly – the lower house of the French bicameral parliament. However, the UMP, and later LR, has seen a persistent downward trend in the years since, with declining seat totals in each successive legislative election. In France's most recent legislative elections in July 2024, LR won less than 6% of the popular vote and now leads a parliamentary group of just 48 deputies – as compared to the populist right-wing *Rassemblement National*²⁶⁷ (RN), which has 123.²⁶⁸ Details on the RN's history and political classification are given later in this Chapter, in Box 4.4.

265. *Les Républicains*: The Republicans.

266. *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*: Union for a Popular Movement.

267. *Rassemblement National*: National Rally.

268. Translation: 'National Rally'.

Part of this recent decline came after Éric Ciotti, the LR Leader between 2022 and 2024, announced an unexpected electoral alliance with the populist RN; a decision which split the party. Sixteen would-be LR deputies were instead elected to Ciotti's new RN-aligned party, *Union des Droites pour la République*²⁶⁹ (UDR).

However, the decline of LR does not reflect a disappearance of the French centre-right. On the contrary, in 2021, 31% of French people identified as centre-right, compared to just 19% as centre-left and 17% as centrist, according to a study by the French liberal progressive think tank Fondapol.²⁷⁰ This brings us to the second wing of the French centre-right: the nominally centrist factions which have come to the fore in the years since 2002 and can be viewed as the liberal wing of the French centre-right.

The clearest embodiment of this faction in recent years has come under the leadership of Emmanuel Macron. Hailing originally from the social democratic *Parti Socialiste*²⁷¹ (PS), Macron founded his party *En Marche*²⁷² in 2016 – rebranded as *Renaissance* (RE) in 2022 – and marketed it as a movement that was “neither to the right nor to the left.”²⁷³ However, Macron has since borne a close philosophical resemblance to centre-right traditions of leaders like Giscard d’Estaing.²⁷⁴ French polling company IFOP found that Macron’s vote base for the 2017 presidential election had an average left-right score of 5.2 on a scale from 0 to 10, a figure which had risen to 5.9 by 2019.²⁷⁵ By the 2022 presidential

269. Union des Droites pour la République: Union of the Right for the Republic.

270. Victor Delage (ed.), “The conversion of Europeans to right-wing values: France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom”, Fondation Pour L’Innovation Politique, <https://www.fondapol.org/en/study/the-conversion-of-europeans-to-right-wing-values/> (2021) 10; this study asked respondents “on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 represents the left and 10 the right, where would you say you stand?”, on this scale it grouped 2, 3 and 4 as centre-left, 5 as centrist, and 6, 7 and 8 as centre-right.

271. Parti Socialiste: Socialist Party.

272. En Marche: Forward(!).

273. Translation: ‘Socialist Party’, ‘Forward(!)’ and ‘Resurgence/Rebirth’, ‘Emmanuel Macron: ni à droite, ni à gauche... mais en marche vers 2017’, France 24, 7 April 2016, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20160704-emmanuel-macron-marche-mouvement-politique-francois-hollande-2017>.

274. Paul Gratian, “Macron est-il l’héritier de Valéry Giscard d’Estaing ? Ces six points qui les rassemblent,” *Ouest France*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/politique/valery-giscard-d-estaing/macron-est-il-l-heritier-de-valery-giscard-d-estaing-ces-six-points-qui-les-rassemblent-7071655>.

275. Jérôme Fourquet, “Le positionnement des Français et d’Emmanuel Macron sur un axe gauche-droite”, ifop, <https://www.ifop.com/publication/le-positionnement-des-francais-et-d-emmanuel-macron-sur-un-axe-gauche-droite-2/> (2019). 0 indicates maximally left-wing and 10 indicates maximally right-wing.

election, an estimated 63% of Macron's support came from right-wing voters.²⁷⁶ Macron's brand of centrism has certain internationalist, cosmopolitan tendencies, but otherwise demonstrates clear centre-right characteristics; for example in improving business freedoms and scaling back welfare spending (forms of economic liberalism), and clamping down on immigration (a form of non-cosmopolitanism) – areas to be explored further below. Macron's parliamentary group *Ensemble pour la République*²⁷⁷ (EPR) currently holds just 94 deputies, down from 308 in 2017. However, it is important to note that – in a parliament marked by plurality – this is still the second largest group in the chamber.

This centrist wing of the centre-right also includes two other parliamentary groups that supported Macron's 2022 coalition and act as key allies. First of these is the *Horizons et Indépendants*²⁷⁸ group – presently consisting of 33 deputies – led by former Prime Minister and LR deputy Édouard Philippe, and founded in 2021 to provide a more distinct right-leaning component within Macron's presidential majority. This centrist bloc also includes the *Mouvement Démocrate*²⁷⁹ (MoDem), led by current Prime Minister François Bayrou, which has a parliamentary group of 36 deputies and stems from the liberal centre-right factions which declined to join the UMP in 2002. Some slight philosophical differences separate these groups, but their centre-right nature is visible both in their long term ties to Macron, and their ongoing support for reducing state expenditure. This report references these groupings where relevant, but, given their small size and strong ties to *En Marche/Renaissance*,²⁸⁰ references to the centrist wing of the centre-right will focus primarily on Macron and the EPR.

276. Dominique Reynié (ed.), "Political shifts and government majority in right-leaning France", Fondation Pour L'Innovation Politique, <https://www.fondapol.org/app/uploads/2022/09/fondapol-study-political-shifts-and-government-majority-in-right-leaning-france-09-2022-2.pdf> (2022) 8; the figure cited here includes voters who position themselves on the right (47%), voters who position themselves in the centre but who adhere to a right-wing value system (9.4%), and voter who do not position themselves on the political spectrum but who adhere to a right-wing value system (6.5%).

277. Ensemble pour la République: Together for the Republic.

278. Horizons et Indépendants: Horizons and Independents.

279. Mouvement Démocrate: Democratic Movement.

280. Renaissance: Resurgence or Rebirth.

Overall, the French centre-right differs from that of other countries, such as the UK, due to its diasporic nature. The French centre-right was, for a time, represented by the umbrella party of the UMP, however, it has since been split across a range of different political parties each of which emphasise different principles of the European centre-right.

Tenets of the French centre-right

Having outlined the key political parties representative of the French centre-right, we can now unpack the values that these parties typically stand for.

The French centre-right has long been divided into different camps with competing sets of values, as explained in Box 4.1 below. It is therefore difficult to identify tenets that have consistently applied to all of its competing factions. That being said, it is possible to draw out certain common principles which, while not universal, can serve as a guide to centre-right thinking in France. With this in mind, this Chapter will draw on the core principles of the European centre-right outlined in Chapter Two, using specific national context to lay out three tenets of the French centre-right: Gaullist conservatism, economic liberalisation and republicanism.

Box 4.1. The competing traditions of the French right

According to the eminent French political historian René Rémond, the broader French right can traditionally be split into three competing post-revolutionary traditions: Legitimists, rooted in monarchism and defined by traditionalism and scepticism towards modern republican values; Orléanists, rooted originally in constitutional monarchy, but defined more generally by liberal conservatism and capitalism; and Bonapartists, rooted in the Napoleonic tenets of strong leadership, the powerful state and mass public support.²⁸¹ More recently, French historian

281. René Rémond, *Les droites en France* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1982).

Michel Winock suggested adding a fourth ‘nationalist-populist’ right, harking back to nineteenth-century traditions such as Boulangisme – a radical mass movement centred around popular General Georges Boulanger, combining nationalism, populism and authoritarianism which briefly threatened the stability of the French Third Republic (1870-1940).²⁸² There is a certain overlap between the Bonapartist and ‘nationalist-populist’ traditions in that both rely on plebiscitary rhetoric and charismatic leadership. However, while Bonapartism is rooted in the idea of national unity under a strong leader who stands above party and class divisions, the ‘nationalist-populist’ tradition is more divisive, typically seeking to mobilise popular anger against the established order.

It is possible to try to ascribe these labels to existing factions of the broader French right, for example with LR as the Orléanists, Macron’s centrists as the Bonapartists and the RN embodying both the legitimist and nationalist-populist streams. However, in reality these traditions transcend party lines, with multiple traditions often visible within each faction. Indeed, in 2012 Winock argued that Sarkozy represented all four streams: Bonapartism in his strong executive style of leadership; Legitimism in his traditionalism and defence of Catholicism; Orléanism in his pro-business agenda; and nationalist-populism in his mobilisation of popular anger against high levels of immigration.²⁸³ Regardless, these four streams are a useful illustration of the diverse nature of the broader French right, with the tension between the Orléanist and Bonpartist streams serving as a particularly useful reference point when discussing the core tenets of the centre-right below.

Gaullist conservatism

Our first tenet, Gaullist conservatism, refers to the French centre-right’s belief in a strong stable state where the executive defends tradition and traditional values through moderate reform but has the power to drive through bold changes where they lie in the national interest. This

282. Winock, *La Droite: hier et aujourd’hui*.

283. *Ibid*, 184-87.

specifically French tenet blends elements of the European centre-right principles of conservatism and non-cosmopolitanism.

Respect for tradition and traditional values comes through strongly throughout the post-war history of the French centre-right and will be evident later in this Chapter. However, the term *conservateur*²⁸⁴ is often misunderstood and loaded with negative connotations. Indeed, in LR's introspective polling following their 2017 election defeats, when asked what should be at the core of the French right, just 11% of party members chose conservatism as their answer.²⁸⁵

Two main criticisms are levelled against this term. First, it is seen as an anglophone import, associated historically with the United Kingdom, and more recently with American 'neoconservatives'.²⁸⁶ Second, and much more significantly, it has been seen as synonymous with counter-revolutionary sentiment, excessive traditionalism and immobilism.²⁸⁷ Given that Burkean conservatism presented itself in direct contrast to the revolutionary fervour that has since become central to France's national mythology, such antipathy is unsurprising.²⁸⁸ This aversion to conservatism is illustrative of the residual tension between the Bonapartist and Orléanist streams on the French centre-right and requires us to qualify this tenet with the word 'Gaullist.' This term – explored briefly in Box 4.2 below – has many connotations, but is added here to differentiate the Bonapartist nature of French conservatism from that seen elsewhere in Europe.

Regardless of how it chooses to label itself, the French centre-right remains recognisably conservative – indeed the most popular answer in LR's 2017 polling, 'reformative,' clearly reflects conservatism's

284. *Conservateur*: Conservative.

285. Paul Laubacher, "Gaullisme, conservatisme ou patriotisme ? Ce que veulent vraiment les adhérents LR", *Le Nouvel Obs*, 28 September 2017, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/20170928.OBS5256/gaullisme-conservatisme-ou-patriotisme-ce-que-veulent-vraiment-les-adherents-lr.html>.

286. Jean-Philippe Vincent, "Le conservatisme, l'idéologie du courant anti-idéologique", *L'Opinion*, 6 September 2016, <https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/le-conservatisme-lideologie-du-courant-anti-ideologique>.

287. *Ibid.*

288. Christophe Geffroy, "Vous avez dit conservateur ?", *La Nef*, April 2023, <https://lanef.net/2023/03/31/vous-avez-dit-conservateur/>.

preference for moderate, iterative change.²⁸⁹ The French centre-right aligns with its European peers in its opposition to radicalism and its general Orléanist preference for moderate iterative reform. However, the long-term influence of De Gaulle has imbued it with a greater aversion towards parliamentary immobilism and a more pragmatic willingness to employ the presidential powers of the executive.

Box 4.2. Gaullism

Charles De Gaulle, the wartime leader of Free France and the first president of the Fifth Republic, remains a major influence on French politics. The 1947-1955 Gaullist party, the *Rassemblement du Peuple Français*²⁹⁰ (RPF), cannot be defined as centre-right due to its distinctly non-centrist character – the RPF represented an extreme anti-institutional force seeking to overturn the constitution of the Fourth Republic (1946-58). Likewise, prior to the foundation of the UMP, the French centre-right was largely divided between more conservative Gaullists and more liberal non-Gaullists. However, the political philosophy of Gaullism – referring broadly to the values of national independence, a strong centralised state and the unifying authority of a powerful executive – is of central importance for the French centre-right as a whole.

Two elements of this philosophy warrant particular attention. First, De Gaulle was especially influential in promoting French sovereignty through a particular conception of national mythology. The Gaullist idea that “France cannot be France without *grandeur*”²⁹¹ is readily apparent in the foreign policy of centre-right leaders influenced by a desire to maintain France’s *rang*²⁹² in international affairs.²⁹³ This is a French

289. Laubacher, “Gaullisme, conservatisme ou patriotisme ?”, *Le Nouvel Obs*, 2017.

290. *Rassemblement du Peuple Français*: Rally for the French People.

291. *Grandeur*: Greatness. In France, this term is closely tied to the idea of projecting power and influence on the world stage. While ‘greatness’ and ‘grandeur’ are direct translations, other connotations include ‘national prestige’ and ‘national standing.’

292. *Rang*: Rank. Similar to ‘grandeur’, ‘rang’ refers to a country’s or individual’s position or status, often in a hierarchy or on the international stage. “Rank” and “standing” are direct translations, but “status” or “position” may be used depending on context.

293. Charles de Gaulle, *The War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2024), 3.

version of non-cosmopolitanism, as defined in Chapter Two. Second, Gaullism is marked by a deep sense of pragmatism. A key part of De Gaulle's effectiveness as a leader was his ability to discard ideology or partisan loyalties when dealing with major political challenges such as the 1954-62 Algerian War. This is a French version of conservatism, as defined in Chapter Two.

However, it is important to note that the extent of this Gaullist pragmatism also contributed to the centre-right's subsequent divisions. De Gaulle's adaptability and his cross-party appeal relied on a very loose political philosophy marked by unpredictable, often contradictory, policy stances. This was particularly evident concerning European integration where De Gaulle's attitudes swung between the need for Europe as an extension of French power, and scepticism over the threat that supranationalism posed to French sovereignty. Therefore, while De Gaulle boosted the centre-right's short-term electoral fortunes, his deep pragmatism failed to create a unified centre-right tradition; a reality illustrated by the fact that De Gaulle's legacy is increasingly claimed by parties of all political shades.²⁹⁴

Economic liberalisation

Our second tenet is the French centre-right's commitment to the process of economic liberalisation. Despite France historically generally seeing a higher level of state intervention in the economy than in most Western European countries – even during periods of centre-right government – the French centre-right has represented the major driving force towards greater business freedoms, privatisation of industry, relaxing labour laws and lowering state spending, whenever these changes have occurred.²⁹⁵

294. Manu Saadia, "Gaullism at a crossroads", *The Critic*, 19 November 2021, <https://thecritic.co.uk/gaullism-at-a-crossroads/>; John Lichfield, "Why all French politicians are Gaullists", *Politico*, 9 November 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-charles-de-gaulle-gaullists-emmanuel-macron-marine-le-pen/>.

295. Emmanuel Chadeau, "The Rise and Decline of State-Owned Industry in Twentieth Century France", in Pier Angelo Toninelli (ed.), *The Rise and Fall of State-Owned Enterprise in the Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 185-207.

France is actually a country marked by a strong historic aversion to economic liberalism. Since the influence of Jean-Baptiste Colbert – chief finance minister under King Louis XIV who strengthened French economic power in the seventeenth century through mercantilist policies – France has had a marked tendency towards using state economic interventionism. Colbertism has persisted in the centuries since, most notably through the *dirigiste*²⁹⁶ approach to France's post-war recovery. France's state-led economic planning body, the *Commissariat Général du Plan*,²⁹⁷ lasted from 1946 until 2006, and to this day the French state owns shares in 83 companies across energy, industry, transport and financial services, including complete control of the French national rail company, SNCF, and the multinational energy giant EDF.²⁹⁸

However, underneath this interventionism, the French centre-right has spearheaded a long-term liberalisation of economic policy, beginning with the liberal presidency of Giscard d'Estaing and mainstreamed particularly in the late eighties with the privatisations of the Chirac Government (1986-88) – a process explored later in this Chapter. This tenet of economic liberalisation now serves as a unifying thread across the diasporic centre-right, clearly distinguishing it from the persistently statist alternatives both to the left and on the populist right. In times of economic difficulties, 77% of self-identified centre-right French voters and 62% of French self-identified centrists suggest the state should place more trust in companies and give them greater freedom as compared to 49% of the self-identified far-right, 40% of the self-identified centre-left and 31% of self-identified the far-left, according 2021 polling by Fondapol.²⁹⁹

However, it is important to recognise that the adherence to economic liberalism is not universal on the French centre-right, and attitudes remain more interventionist than in other centre-right traditions. This

296. *Dirigiste*: Interventionist.

297. *Commissariat Général du Plan*: General Planning Commission.

298. "Les participations publiques", Agence des participations de l'État, <https://www.economie.gouv.fr/agence-participations-etat/Les-participations-publiques> (2024).

299. Victor Delage (ed.), "The conversion of Europeans to right-wing values" (2021), 18.

is embodied in Macron's economic policy record. Macron demonstrated a clear commitment to economic liberalisation early into his presidency in 2017 when he defied major protests and overhauled France's 3,000 page labour code in favour of business freedoms, including capping the damages paid to workers for unfair dismissal.³⁰⁰ However, Macron has also displayed more interventionist tendencies; for example renationalising EDF in 2022.³⁰¹ In the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent European energy crisis, this move was explicitly linked to the goal of having sovereign control over nuclear energy production and strategic energy decisions. This decision therefore illustrates how the French centre-right's liberal economics are sometimes shelved in the interests of independence and sovereignty, aims which form part of this Chapter's final tenet.

Republicanism

Our final tenet, republicanism, refers to the French centre-right's commitment to upholding the sovereignty, unity and indivisibility of the Republic – a uniquely French idea linked to the principle of non-cosmopolitanism. The foundational republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity are universally revered in French politics.³⁰² However, republicanism also encompasses challenging questions of assimilation, *laïcité*³⁰³ and national sovereignty, where consensus is much harder to find. The degree to which these principles are prioritised differs across the French centre-right, making republicanism the most problematic of our three tenets.

First, the French centre-right strongly adheres to the positive,

300. "France's Macron signs labour reforms in law, defying protests", BBC, 22 September 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-41358850>.

301. Sharon Wajsbrot, "EDF: l'Etat confirme la nationalisation à 100 %", *Les Echos*, 6 July 2022, <https://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/energie-environnement/letat-confirme-la-nationalisation-dedfa-100-1775016>.

302. Yves Mény, "Republicanism: A transatlantic misunderstanding", in Robert Elgie, Emiliano Grossman, and Amy G. Mazur (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of French Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017), 14-43 (16).

303. *Laïcité*: Secularism. This is a uniquely French concept referring to the strict separation of religion and state, ensuring that public institutions remain secular and that religion does not influence government affairs. While "secularism" is the closest English equivalent, it does not fully capture the historical, cultural and legal baggage of "laïcité."

universalist sense of French republicanism. This refers to the idea that all citizens are equal before the law and should be treated as individuals without regard to their origins, religion, ethnicity or other group identity. However, as part of this universalism, centre-right republicanism also expects citizens to integrate into a shared national culture and respect common republican values. This tenet therefore links to contentious national debates around issues of assimilation and *laïcité*.

In France, *laïcité* has a unique cultural significance and refers not simply to the separation of church and state but to the belief that the only community should be the national republican community. Loyalty to any more local sub-groupings – be they communal, ethnic, religious or cultural – is viewed as a threat to republican identity. Fears about this societal splintering – referred to by their detractors as *communautarisme*³⁰⁴ or *séparatisme*³⁰⁵ – have come particularly to the fore since the eighties, linked to high levels of immigration and concerns around the issue of religious symbols worn in public spaces such as schools. In truth, the centre-right is more aligned on this issue than the French left, where internal debates on *communautarisme* have proven highly destructive.³⁰⁶ Nevertheless, it remains an area of division where populist influence can widen rifts between the liberal and conservative wings of the centre-right, as explored later in this Chapter.

304. Communautarisme: no direct English equivalent exists for this term, with the closest alternative being sectarianism. In France, communautarisme essentially represents a negative reflection of the term multiculturalism, used by critics to refer to the formation of insular, self-segregating communities.

305. Séparatisme: Separatism. Linked to communautarisme, this politically charged term is used to frame certain religious or cultural practices as incompatible with republican values, likewise connecting to broader fears about the fragmentation of national unity.

306. Anne-Hélène Le Cornec Ubertaini, *Le poison du communautarisme – La gauche sans le peuple* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2024).

Box 4.3. National preference

When applied in a French context, the idea of favouring one's local community over those outside it – defined earlier as non-cosmopolitanism – immediately evokes the idea of *préférence nationale*.³⁰⁷ This is a policy position traditionally more associated with the French populist right than the centre-right and refers to the principle that French citizens should be given priority over foreigners in access to jobs, housing, welfare, and other social benefits, reflecting the party's nationalist and anti-immigration stance. National preference has been a longstanding feature of campaigns by the populist right since the late eighties when Jean-Marie Le Pen's *Front National*³⁰⁸ (FN) proposed amending labour codes to allow employers to prioritise French nationals when hiring and to reserve end-of-entitlement benefits for French unemployed people.³⁰⁹

However, hardening attitudes on immigration have seen greater alignment across the French right in recent years. For example, in December 2023, Macron's centre-right Government passed an immigration law which specifically included measures prioritising French nationals, for example implementing a minimum period of five years residency before non-working immigrants become eligible for certain benefits such as family allowances. This law provoked intense debate and internal dissent from left-leaning members of his coalition, including the resignation of Health Minister Aurélien Rousseau.³¹⁰ It was also widely reported as a victory for the RN – an issue raised in this Chapter's final section.³¹¹

307. *Préférence nationale*: National preference.

308. *Front National*: National Front.

309. Antoine Guerrier and Christine Moncla, "De Jean-Marie à Marine Le Pen : trente ans de progression du vote FN", *Radio France*, 23 April 2017, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/de-jean-marie-a-marine-le-pen-30-ans-de-progression-du-vote-fn-4785210>.

310. "Loi immigration : démission du ministre de la santé, fronde des départements de gauche", *La Croix*, 20 December 2023, <https://www.la-croix.com/france/loi-immigration-elisabeth-borne-dit-avoir-le-sentiment-du-devoir-accomplir-20231220>.

311. For example, see Romain Brunet, "Loi immigration : le jour où Emmanuel Macron a offert une victoire politique à l'extrême droite", *France 24*, 20 December 2023, <https://www.france24.com/fr/france/20231220-loi-immigration-le-jour-o%C3%B9-emmanuel-macron-a-offert-une-victoire-politique-%C3%A0-l-extr%C3%Aame-droite>.

Republicanism's national sovereignty dimension is similarly divisive. In line with the Gaullist heritage earlier outlined in Box 4.2, centre-right parties have traditionally been strong defenders of an independent role for France on the world stage, promoting both its cultural and political autonomy. However, as previously mentioned, De Gaulle failed to provide a clear stance on sovereignty-related issues such as European integration – something which has fostered subsequent divisions between the more and less internationalist poles of the French centre-right.

Broadly speaking, the French centre-right has shifted progressively towards a more pro-European stance since De Gaulle, viewing the European Union as an extension of French independent influence rather than a limit on it. This internationalist outlook is embodied by Macron who has attempted to marry the language of republicanism and globalisation. The president is a key proponent of the view that, while France should not conform to globalising trends, taking on a greater role within the European Union offers it an opportunity to shape them in a French direction.³¹² These views are demonstrated by Macron's strong support for closer European integration, as evidenced by his key role in negotiating the unprecedented debt mutualisation – effectively, the spreading out of debt over multiple countries – of €750 billion for the EU's COVID-19 recovery plan.³¹³

However, it is important to recognise that this outward-looking republicanism is not universal on the French centre-right. For example, in recent years LR has criticised Macron for undermining French autonomy with decisions such as debt mutualisation, and the party remains more preoccupied with Gaullist concerns about national

312. Andrew WM Smith, "Overview: Between Gaullism and Globalisation: Opening Up the Fifth Republic, 1958-2020", in David Andress (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of French History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), 471-482 (479).

313. "The agreement reached at the European Council is unprecedented. On French TV channel TF1, Emmanuel Macron discusses the issues of the agreement and its impact for France", Élysée, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/07/21/the-agreement-reached-at-the-european-council-is-unprecedented-on-french-tv-channel-tf1-emmanuel-macron-discusses-the-issues-of-the-agreement-and-its-impact-for-france> (2020).

sovereignty.³¹⁴ This dimension of republicanism therefore represents another area where the centre-right is therefore at risk of being further divided along the pro- and anti-internationalist faultline which is strengthening in French politics.³¹⁵

History of the French centre-right

The Fourth Republic, 1946-1958

Under the post-war Fourth Republic (1946-58) French politics was remarkably chaotic, with 28 governments in just 12 years.³¹⁶ Having led France's provisional post-war government (1944-46), De Gaulle spent these years in self-imposed political exile after resigning in protest against the Fourth Republic's weak executive system.

During this fractious period, the most prominent centre-right parties were the Christian democratic *Mouvement Républicain Populaire*³¹⁷ (MRP) and the *Centre National des Indépendants et Paysans*³¹⁸ (CNIP). However, they both formed part of a patchwork of centrist coalitions that included also the socialist *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière*³¹⁹ (SFIO) and were held together primarily through opposition to the anti-system forces of both the communists and the early Gaullists of the RPF. The centre-right parties initially made up a powerful part of this patchwork; in the 1946 legislative elections they gained 39% of the popular vote, winning 225 seats.³²⁰ However, this power waned as the Gaullist movement grew, such that in the 1956 legislative elections

314. "Maîtriser notre destin: Programme élections européennes – 9 juin 2024", Les Républicains, <https://republicains.fr/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2024-05-14-IR-elections-europeennes-programme.pdf> (2024), pp 6-7.

315. Emile Chabal and Michael Behrent, "Between Neoliberalism and the Nation: France's Political Landscape in 2022", *Modern & Contemporary France* 30.4 (2022): 517-533 (521).

316. François Petry, "Coalition Bargaining in the French Fourth Republic 1946–58", in M.J. Laver and I. Budge (eds.), *Party Policy and Government Coalitions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992) 380-408.

317. *Mouvement Républicain Populaire*: Popular Republican Movement.

318. *Centre National des Indépendants et Paysans*: National Centre of Independents and Peasants. While 'paysans' can be used in a pejorative sense, it is worth noting that in this context it does not have the same negative connotations as 'peasants' would have in English. It rather was used to emphasise the party's rural ties to small farmers.

319. *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière*: French Section of the Workers' International.

320. "Élections législatives novembre 1946", France Politique, <https://www.france-politique.fr/elections-legislatives-novembre-1946.htm> (2019).

the CNIP and MRP held only 166 seats and a combined vote share of just 26%.³²¹ Therefore, while centre-right politicians played important roles in Fourth Republic governments, the political chaos of these years means this is not a period where we can identify a clear centre-right policy direction.

The Gaullist reset, 1958-1968

This situation changed after 1958 when growing anti-constitutional sentiment around the Algerian War allowed De Gaulle – who had kept his distance from mainstream politics since 1946 – to return to power and establish a new, strongly presidential Fifth Republic (1958-present). This new constitution granted the president significant executive powers including the ability to appoint the Prime Minister, dissolve the National Assembly, call referenda and govern by decree in times of crisis. Despite this constitutional upheaval, De Gaulle displayed a clear blend of conservatism and non-cosmopolitanism; for example by continuing pro-natalist policies of tax breaks for married couples and defending against American cultural influence through a new Ministry of Cultural Affairs, set up in 1959, which prioritised funding for French-language films, literature and theatre over foreign works. The founding of the Fifth Republic therefore marks both the end of Gaullism's status as an anti-establishment force in French politics and the advent of Gaullist conservatism as a defining feature of the centre-right.

Gaullism was highly successful in the early Fifth Republic. Gaullists triumphed in every legislative election from 1958 until 1981. However – as outlined in Box 4.2 earlier – the centre-right's long term cohesion was undermined by the fact that De Gaulle's presidential dominance failed to engender a unified centre-right tradition. Despite clear centre-right values, De Gaulle failed to turn these into recognisable, consistent policy positions. He therefore opened up a period where

321. Thomas T. Mackie and Richard Rose, *The International Almanac of Electoral History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982) 132–134.

different factions gradually moved from coalition into opposition when De Gaulle contradicted the policy positions they previously believed he would support.³²² This was particularly evident with De Gaulle's republicanism, where his disproportionate preoccupation with national sovereignty ended up isolating many centre-right allies. For example, Antoine Pinay, a prominent CNIP politician who was made finance minister by De Gaulle, resigned in 1960 over De Gaulle's critical attitude towards NATO. Furthermore, five MRP ministers resigned in 1962 after De Gaulle underlined his Euroscepticism in a speech where he denounced EU supranationalism and declared "there cannot be any Europe other than that of the [nation] states, apart from in myths, fiction and parades."³²³

Therefore, while some non-Gaullist centre-right figures such as Giscard d'Estaing remained allied to De Gaulle until 1969, much of the non-Gaullist centre-right ended up in opposition over the course of the sixties. This is evidenced, among others, by the formation of the Democratic Centre grouping in 1966 which fused elements of the MRP and CNIP and supported a number of censure motions against the Gaullist Government of the time.³²⁴

Post-De Gaulle rapprochement, 1969-2002

After the May 1968 protests – anti-capitalist student demonstrations which quickly developed into a nation-wide general strike – De Gaulle's presidency became emblematic of an outdated hierarchical society resistant to change. Though the President survived the immediate crisis, his defeat in the 1969 referendum on government decentralisation led to his resignation. He died in November the following year. De Gaulle's departure marked the beginning of a period of convergence and

322. Knapp, *Parties and the Party System in France*, 75.

323. Eric Anceau, "De Gaulle and Europe", Digital Encyclopedia of European History, <https://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/international-relations/arbiters-and-arbitration-in-europe-beginning-modern-times/de-gaulle-and-europe> (2020).

324. Knapp, *Parties and the Party System in France*, 77.

‘ideological rapprochement’ among French centre-right parties.³²⁵

This convergence became rapidly evident in terms of foreign policy, with Gaullists and non-Gaullists moving in a more pro-European direction. For example, in 1969, De Gaulle’s Gaullist successor Georges Pompidou – President from 1969 to 1974 – made a speech in the Hague committing to further the European Union’s “completion,” “strengthening” and “enlargement.”³²⁶

However, more significant alignment came around the tenet of economic liberalisation with the election of the non-Gaullist President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in 1974. The President rallied the centre-right around a vision of the *société libérale avancée*,³²⁷ aiming to modernise France by balancing economic liberalism and social progress. Giscard d’Estaing therefore advocated for a more open, market-based economy with greater budgetary discipline while also pursuing social measures like legalising divorce and ending the state’s public broadcasting monopoly by dismantling the French Broadcasting and Television Office (ORTF).³²⁸ Giscard d’Estaing also helped to streamline the French centre-right by using his presidential momentum to unite the non-Gaullist centre-right in 1978 under a new party, the *Union pour la Démocratie Française*³²⁹ (UDF). This party grouped the existing *Parti Républicain* (PR), *Centre des Démocrates Sociaux*³³⁰ (CDS), the *Parti Social-démocrate*³³¹ (PSD), the *Parti Radical* and the *Clubs Perspectives et Réalités*³³² (CPR).

However, the end of the *trente glorieuses* – France’s thirty-year post-war economic boom – saw Giscard d’Estaing’s presidency end in

325. Ibid, 80.

326. “Statement by Georges Pompidou (The Hague, 1 December 1969)”, Centre virtuel de la connaissance sur l’Europe (CVCE), https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/statement_by_georges_pompidou_the_hague_1_december_1969-en-84bece9b-a2de-49aa-982c-c6c2c454be24.html (2015).

327. *Société libérale avancée*: Advanced liberal society. A central concept in Giscard d’Estaing’s presidency, this term was meant to signify a deliberate break from both Gaullist statism and left-wing collectivism. It combined economic modernisation with social reform and a commitment to civil liberties, aiming to adapt the French state to the realities of a post-industrial, pluralistic society.

328. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, *Démocratie Française* (Paris: Fayard, 1976); Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic: Nation, State, and Citizenship in Contemporary France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 247–48.

329. *Union pour la Démocratie Française*: Union for French Democracy.

330. *Centre des Démocrates Sociaux*: Centre of Social Democrats.

331. *Parti Social-démocrate*: Social Democratic Party.

332. *Clubs Perspectives et Réalités*: Perspectives and Realities Clubs.

“resounding economic failure.”³³³ This was matched in 1981 by electoral disaster, as Giscard d’Estaing lost the presidential election in May and, at the legislative election in June, the centre-right bloc dropped from 290 seats to just 158.³³⁴

Yet, rather than killing the momentum of Giscard d’Estaing’s economic liberalisation, the election of his replacement, Socialist President François Mitterrand, catalysed both the UDF and Gaullist Rally for the Republic (RPR) to rally around an even more economically liberal policy agenda of privatisation and deregulation.³³⁵ Therefore, despite electoral failure in 1981, Giscard d’Estaing’s ideological shift nevertheless marks a key turning point and the beginning of a form of liberal economic hegemony on the French centre-right.³³⁶ This is evidenced by the RPR and UDF forming an alliance for the 1986 legislative elections, campaigning on promises to reverse President Mitterrand’s 1981 wave of nationalisations in banking, steel and electronics and to encourage job creation through greater contract flexibility.³³⁷ The campaign was a success, winning 290 seats and forcing Mitterrand into a cohabitation with the Gaullist Prime Minister Jacques Chirac; a feat the alliance repeated to great effect in 1993 with 484 seats after being only narrowly defeated in 1988.³³⁸

During this period, part of the centre-right strategy was also to adopt a firmer brand of republicanism in response to high immigration, terror attacks and increased concerns about assimilation and the breakdown of law and order. For example, once in office in 1986, Chirac’s

333. François Denord, “The Long Road of French Neoliberalism”, in Clarisse Berthezène and Jean-Christian Vinel (eds.), *Postwar Conservatism, A Transnational Investigation: Britain, France, and the United States, 1930-1990* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 79-94 (89-90).

334. Elections législatives 1981, Perspective Monde, <https://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMElection?codePays=FRA&dateElection=FRA1981614&codeInstitution=1> (2024).

335. François Denord, “The Long Road of French Neoliberalism”, 89-90; Knapp, *Parties and the Party System in France*, 84.

336. Gilles Richard, *Histoire des droites en France de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 2017) 514.

337. “Plate-forme commune du RPR et de l’UDF intitulée “Plate-forme pour gouverner ensemble””, *Vie Publique*, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/130106-plate-forme-commune-rpr-udf-16011986-place-de-la-france> (1986).

338. Elections législatives (1986), Perspective Monde, <https://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMElection?codePays=FRA&dateElection=FRA1986316&codeInstitution=1> (2024);

Élections législatives (1993), Perspective Monde, <https://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMElection?codePays=FRA&dateElection=FRA1993321&codeInstitution=1> (2024).

Government implemented the controversial Pasqua Law; the first of a series of stringent immigration measures that facilitated deportations and tightened visa requirements. This shift responded to genuine popular concerns, however, it was also a direct response to the rising popularity of the far-right *Front National* (FN) which had its electoral breakthrough in the 1984 European elections, winning ten of France's 81 seats.³³⁹ Indeed, this shift reflects a broader trend of the RPR and UDF consciously adopting hard-right policy positions to win over voters to the right of the centre-right bloc.³⁴⁰ The extent to which these moves alienated more moderate centre-right voters and legitimised their opponents will be discussed at length later in this Chapter.

Following the recession of the early nineties, the French centre-right made a brief shift back to more “middling economic positions.”³⁴¹ For example, Chirac framed his 1995 presidential campaign around healing France's *fracture sociale*³⁴² through increased public spending. However, only three months into his term, the president changed tack, announcing an austerity programme of fiscal consolidation in response to the French deficit reaching roughly 5% of GDP in 1995 – two percentage points above the level needed for the 1992 Maastricht Treaty's aims of economic and monetary union across the EU.³⁴³ That said, such adjustments also reflect the pragmatism which helps centre-right parties across Europe to moderate their positions and maintain their appeal in pursuit of consistent longer-term aims.

339. Jocelyn Evans and Gilles Ivaldi, “France: Party System Change and the Demise of the Post-Gaullist Right”, in Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 115–140 (127).

340. Jean-Baptiste de Montvalon, “Immigration: depuis Charles Pasqua, la droite défend un modèle toujours plus répressif”, 12 December 2013, *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2013/12/12/depuis-charles-pasqua-la-droite-defend-un-modele-toujours-plus-repressif_4333155_3224.html.

341. This international recession stemmed from factors such as the 1990 oil price shock and decreased defence spending at the end of the Cold War, also including the 1992–93 European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) crisis; Jocelyn Evans and Gilles Ivaldi, “France: Party System Change and the Demise of the Post-Gaullist Right”, in Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) 130.

342. *Fracture sociale*: Social divisions or social divide. This term refers to deep divisions within society, especially between different classes. It became prominent to describe the growing gaps between rich and poor; and between integrated and marginalised communities.

343. John Timsit, “Comment Chirac a délaissé la «fracture sociale» de sa campagne de 1995 au profit de l'euro”, *Figaro*, 13 October 2023, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/comment-chirac-a-delaisse-la-fracture-sociale-de-sa-campagne-de-1995-au-profit-de-l-euro-20231013>

A united centre-right? 2002-2017

By the early nineties the policy differences between the UDF and RPR became increasingly minor, as is illustrated by the fact that the centre-right reached a point where it could feasibly be represented by a single party.³⁴⁴ Since Giscard d'Estaing liberalising economic influence had effected a change on the French centre-right as a whole, slowly creating the outlines of a cohesive movement.³⁴⁵ However, repeated calls for united centre-right through the nineties were also given weight by crises that exposed its vulnerability and highlighted the urgent need for a more unified political force. The centre-right parties had performed poorly in the 1997 snap legislative election – winning only 253 seats, down from 484 at the previous election. Likewise, the shock appearance of a FN candidate in the 2002 presidential runoff served as another wake-up call, underlining the risks of a divided right-wing electorate.³⁴⁶

Calls for a unified centre-right were answered in 2002 when the *Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle*,³⁴⁷ later renamed *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP), grouped the RPR and most of the UDF alongside the smaller conservative-liberal *Démocratie Libérale*³⁴⁸ (DL), the remnants of the CNIP and the *Parti Radical*³⁴⁹ from the centrist *Mouvement des Réformateurs*³⁵⁰ (MDR).³⁵¹ This formation was highly successful in 2002's legislative election, leading a presidential majority that won 398 seats and 53% of the vote in the second round.³⁵²

The UMP retained power until 2012 under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy who continued the centre-right's trajectory of economic liberalisation and Gaullist conservatism. However, Sarkozy went

344. Knapp, *Parties and the Party System in France*, 83.

345. Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic: Nation, State, and Citizenship in Contemporary France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 246.

346. Florence Haegel, "The transformation of the French Right: Institutional imperatives and organizational changes", *French Politics*, 2.2 (2004), 185-202 (196-97).

347. *Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle*: Union for a Presidential Majority.

348. *Démocratie Libérale*: Liberal Democracy.

349. *Parti Radical*: Radical Party.

350. *Mouvement des Réformateurs*: Reformers' Movement.

351. *Ibid*, 188-89.

352. "Les élections législatives de 2002," *Vie Publique* Fr; <https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/285786-resultats-des-elections-legislatives-2002> (2002).

much further than his predecessors in terms of republicanism and the defence of the national community. His electoral programme was designed specifically to attract FN voters through war on crime and a strong focus on limiting immigration.³⁵³ Sarkozy implemented a tough approach to crime, which regularly provoked controversy. For example, after Romani Gypsies launched an armed protest against police violence in 2010, Sarkozy pursued a crackdown that saw almost 1,000 Roma immigrants deported back to eastern Europe between July and September, earning widespread criticism for targeting people based on their ethnicity and as such violating EU discrimination laws.³⁵⁴

The UMP's fortunes subsequently saw a rapid decline as the global financial crisis undermined its economic agenda – the party lost 116 seats in the 2012 legislative elections followed by a further 93 in the 2017 elections under its new name *Les Républicains* (LR).³⁵⁵ However, this decline can also be linked to the alienation of liberal voters by Sarkozy's rightward shift, a factor to be explored further below.

The centre-right diaspora, 2017-present

While LR has declined dramatically, the French centre-right has also witnessed rise of nominally centrist forces – outlined in this Chapter's introduction – which since 2017 have represented the dominant force in what has since become a splintered, diasporic centre-right.

Since 2002, François Bayrou led a small rump UDF party outside the umbrella of the UMP, campaigning on a more progressive platform.³⁵⁶ While this party – rebranded as the *Mouvement Démocrate* (MoDem)

353. Winock, *La Droite: hier et aujourd'hui*, 186-87.

354. "Une gendarmerie attaquée à la hache dans le Loir-et-Cher", *Le Monde*, 18 July 2010, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frances-expulsion-roma-migrants-test-case-europe> (2010).

355. Evans and Ivaldi, "France: Party System Change and the Demise of the Post-Gaullist Right" (2021), 133-34.

356. As leader of the UDF and MoDem, Bayrou repeatedly advocated for "governing beyond the left-right divide", see "Four-way fight", *The Economist*, 29 March 2007, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2007/03/29/four-way-fight>.

in 2007 – remained small, Bayrou's presidential campaigns in 2007 and 2012 demonstrated the electoral viability of the centre in modern French politics.³⁵⁷ Bayrou won 19% of the vote in the first round of the 2007 election, and though he only won 9% in 2012, he polled as high as 17% in the preceding months. Bayrou therefore helped lay the electoral foundations for Emmanuel Macron who in 2017 won both the presidency and an absolute majority of 351 in the National Assembly – including his own party, *En Marche*, and 42 deputies from MoDem.

Macron and his allies initially differentiated themselves from the mainstream LR with a more culturally progressive programme, promising, for example, to extend IVF and other fertility treatments to single women and female same-sex couples – an issue on which LR was divided and hesitant.³⁵⁸ However, these centrists have not strayed far from the centre-right tenets outlined in this Chapter, something which has undoubtedly been a core part of their appeal and success.

We can get an indication of this from Macron's prime ministerial appointments – he selected former Édouard Philippe in 2017 and Jean Castex in 2020, both of whom were members of LR at the time.³⁵⁹ However, the strongest evidence of Macron's centre-right values comes from his policy positions, particularly regarding economic liberalisation. In Macron's first term he cut corporation tax from 33% to 25% and abolished France's solidarity tax on wealth (ISF), replacing it with a much more lenient real estate wealth tax (IFI). A similar situation transpired regarding Macron's 2023 reforms to address the deficits in the pensions system – projected to exceed €13 billion by 2030, over 2% of France's total state expenditure – by raising the legal retirement age from 62 to 64 and abolishing special pension regimes for certain sectors.

357. Evans and Ivaldi, "France: Party System Change and the Demise of the Post-Gaullist Right" (2021), 134.
 358. Gaël Vaillant, "PMA pour toutes les femmes : chez Les Républicains, tout le monde n'y est pas opposé", *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/pma-pour-toutes-les-femmes-chez-les-republicains-tout-le-monde-ny-est-pas-oppose-3789503>.

359. Jean-François Bayart, "Emmanuel Macron, un révolutionnaire conservateur", *AOC*, 28 February 2024, <https://aoc.media/analyse/2024/02/27/emmanuel-macron-un-revolutionnaire-conservateur/>; Romain Brunet, "One year on, Macron governs as a right-wing French president," *France 24*, 7 May 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180506-france-centrist-emmanuel-macron-governs-right-wing-french-president>.

Both measures were previously championed by LR.³⁶⁰ These reforms triggered mass national protests and votes of no confidence where the President relied heavily on the support of LR. The high profile of these right-leaning measures have given further weight to the argument that Macronist centrism is essentially centre-right in character.³⁶¹

As explored in this Chapter, Macron has also clearly demonstrated Gaullist conservatism. This has come through in his defence of traditional French values, particularly in his second term. In January 2024, Macron called for France's *réarmement démographique*,³⁶² aiming to boost birth rates by reforming parental leave to make it shorter but much better paid – his proposed policy would allow parents a combined six months away from work supported by up to €1900 from the state, rather than the current system fixed at €429 which can stretch up to three years.³⁶³ Macron has shown similar tendencies in his attitudes to language. In January 2024 the President supported a bill raised by LR senators on banning “inclusive language” in official documents – a socially progressive trend for always using both masculine and feminine versions of words when writing – displaying a clear conservatism with his statement that France must “not give in to fashionable trends.”³⁶⁴

The tenet of republicanism has again proven divisive in the diasporic centre-right under Macron's presidency. As previously indicated, Macron has diverged from LR on questions of national sovereignty

360. Elsa Conesa, “Pourquoi cette réforme des retraites ne sera pas la dernière”, *Le Monde*, 18 January 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2023/01/18/pourquoi-cette-reforme-des-retraites-ne-sera-pas-la-derniere_6158349_825448.html; Alexis Boisselier, “Comment la réforme des retraites met les députés Les Républicains à l'épreuve”, *Ouest France*, 31 January 2023, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/economie/retraites/les-republicains-comment-la-reforme-des-retraites-met-la-droite-a-l-epreuve-38474df0-a0ad-11ed-be8f-4d2939631a03>.

361. For example, see Dominique Albertini, “Macron est de droite, il n'y a que la droite qui ne le sait pas”, *Libération*, 27 October 2022, https://www.liberation.fr/politique/macron-est-de-droite-il-ny-a-que-la-droite-qui-ne-le-sait-pas-20221027_LEVILJEG4NB4LAYN4YXDM4C4LU/ and Cécile Cornudet, “Gouvernement Attal : le macronisme vire à droite”, *Les Echos*, 11 January 2024, <https://www.lesechos.fr/politique-societe/emmanuel-macron-president/gouvernement-attal-le-macronisme-vire-a-droite-2045871>.

362. *Réarmement démographique*: Demographic rearmament.

363. “Congé de naissance : trois questions sur ce congé parental remanié pour les deux parents, voulu par Emmanuel Macron”, *Franceinfo*, 8 May 2024, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/conge-de-naissance-trois-questions-sur-ce-conge-parental-remanie-pour-les-deux-parents-voulu-par-emmanuel-macron_6532280.html

364. “Macron opposes gender-inclusive spelling as he inaugurates French language museum”, *France 24*, 30 October 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231030-macron-opposes-gender-neutral-writing-as-he-opens-language-museum>.

and European integration. A divide has also appeared in relation to secularism and the unity of the republican community. Macron has prioritised these issues; indeed, in August 2021 he passed a “Law to strengthen respect for the principles of the Republic,” commonly referred to as the “Law against separatism,” which reinforced secularism, for example extending religious neutrality beyond civil servants to also include publicly contracted services like transport or daycare.³⁶⁵ However, his rhetoric does not fully align with LR which has taken a noticeably firmer line on these topics, particularly regarding the role of Islamism. Indeed, in a recent speech, LR party president Bruno Retailleau stated that “there is only one communitarianism, one separatism that threatens the Republic: Islamism.”³⁶⁶ This divide has recently been brought to the fore by ministerial dissension over an LR bill seeking to ban Islamic headscarves in all French sport competitions. The bill’s supporters, notably Retailleau and Justice Minister Gérald Darmanin, publicly clashed with more cosmopolitan figures such as Marie Barsacq, Minister of Sport and Élisabeth Borne, Minister of Education, who suggested that the proposed ban goes too far, in an internal dispute described as “unacceptable” by the Prime Minister.³⁶⁷

Since 2017, Macron’s centrist movement has lost much of its original appeal. The President’s popularity has dropped dramatically over this period – something linked particularly to his widely contested pension reforms – such that, at the time of writing, just 29% of French people hold a favourable opinion of his leadership, compared to a peak of 47%

365. “Loi du 24 août 2021 confortant le respect des principes de la République”, *Vie Publique*, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/277621-loi-separatisme-respect-des-principes-de-la-republique-24-aout-2021> (2021); Grégoire Poussielgue, “Loi sur le séparatisme : Macron veut passer à la vitesse supérieure face à l’islamisme”, *Les Echos*, 8 December 2020, <https://www.lesechos.fr/politique-societe/emmanuel-macron-president/loi-sur-le-separatisme-macron-veut-passer-a-la-vitesse-superieure-face-a-l-islamisme-1271906>.

366. Célestine Gentilhomme, “À Paris, Retailleau met en garde contre la «menace» de l’islamisme et charge «l’extrême gauche» qui «banalise l’antisémitisme»”, *Le Figaro*, 26 March 2025, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/a-paris-retailleau-met-en-garde-contre-la-menace-de-l-islamisme-et-charge-l-extreme-gauche-qui-banalise-l-antisemitisme-20250326>.

367. Alexis Cuvillier et al., “Voile dans le sport: Bayrou convoque plusieurs ministres après des “critiques internes inacceptables””, *BFM TV*, 18 March 2025, https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/gouvernement/voile-dans-le-sport-bayrou-convoque-quatre-ministres-apres-des-critiques-interne-inacceptables_AN-202503180338.html.

in March 2022.³⁶⁸ Furthermore, Macron's decision to trigger a snap legislative election in June 2024 backfired, causing his parliamentary group *Ensemble pour la République*³⁶⁹ (EPR) to lose its slim majority in the assembly and triggering months of political uncertainty. Former Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier (LR) was able to form a minority centre-right government dominated by ministers from LR, RE and MoDem. However, this administration collapsed in December 2024 after losing a no-confidence vote on its 2025 budget that aimed to bring down France's deficit through €60 billion in combined tax hikes and spending cuts.³⁷⁰ François Bayrou subsequently formed a second centre-right minority coalition and passed a slightly watered down budget in February 2025 – its spending cuts and tax hikes were combined reduced to €53 billion after concessions to the PS – though this success was due to the opposition parties' preference for basic government stability rather than their support for the budget's contents.³⁷¹

At their combined strength, the parliamentary groups of the French centre-right bloc still make up 211 deputies in the National Assembly. This informal grouping – currently referred to as the *socle commun*³⁷² – remains larger than opposition groups either to the left or to the populist right. However, it falls short of a majority and is therefore vulnerable to votes of no-confidence that manage to combine both these anti-establishment poles. Key centre-right tenets persist across this bloc, even despite areas of difference outlined above. However, to capitalise on its residual strength and develop the fragile *socle commun* into a dominant centre-right

368. "La cote de popularité de Macron toujours en hausse, celle de Bayrou chute", *Le Figaro*, 31 March 2025, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/la-cote-de-popularite-de-macron-toujours-en-hausse-celle-de-bayrou-chute-20250331>; "Cote de popularité d'Emmanuel Macron", Ipsos, <https://www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/cote-popularite-emmanuel-macron> (2023).

369. Ensemble pour la République: Together for the Republic.

370. Giorgio Leali, "Barnier makes last-ditch effort to prevent government collapse", Politico, 3 December 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/michel-barnier-vote-france-lawmakers-debate-budget-spending-cuts-2025-prime-minister-tax-hikes/>.

371. Victor Goury-Laffont, "French PM Bayrou survives budget fight but finds himself boxed in", Politico, 13 February 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/french-pm-francois-bayrou-emmanuel-macron-budget-fight-but-finds-himself-boxed-in/>.

372. Socle commun: Shared foundation. Originally used to refer to the coalition of support for Michel Barnier's 2024 government (between Ensemble/Renaissance, Horizons, MoDem and Les Républicains), this label has persisted, signifying the pragmatic, minimum consensus among between these factions necessary to maintain a functioning government in a deeply divided parliament.

electoral force, it will be vital to resolve long-term challenges that have led to its divided state – a topic approached in this Chapter’s next section.

Contemporary challenges

Having charted the fractious history of the French centre-right, this Chapter’s final section will explore its long-term challenges, breaking these into two main themes: the damaging influence of the populist right and leaders’ inability to foster unity.

The influence of the populist right

Of the French centre-right’s external challenges, the most significant has been the influence of the populist, far-right party *Front National* (FN) and, since 2018, its successor the *Rassemblement National* (RN) in 2018. This political force – explored below in Box 4.4 – poses much more of a challenge than in other western European countries.

Box 4.4. The rise of the FN/RN

The *Front National* (FN), founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen, emerged as a far-right party focused on nationalism and law-and-order. The party’s founding members included several antisemitic figures such as Pierre Bousquet, a former member of the *Waffen-SS*, and François Duprat, a prominent fascist essayist known for promoting the theory of Holocaust denial. As such, the FN was highly controversial from its inception and was thus excluded – for the most part – from any electoral cooperation or alliances with other parties by their shared policy of the *cordon sanitaire*.³⁷³

The FN gained traction during the economic and social tensions of the eighties when it focused on anti-immigration themes using racist

373. *Cordon sanitaire*. Much like the sense in which it has been adopted into vernacular English, this term refers to the French political practice whereby mainstream parties collectively refuse any alliance, cooperation, or negotiation with parties considered to be on the far right – most notably the *Front National* (FN), now *Rassemblement National* (RN), in order to exclude them from political power and prevent their participation in governing coalitions.

and xenophobic messaging and charismatic leadership.³⁷⁴ In the 1984 European elections, the FN firmly established itself as an electoral force, winning 11% of the vote and ten of France's 81 seats. Its national breakthrough, however, came in the 2002 presidential election, when Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round with 17% of the vote, eliminating the Socialist Party candidate.

After electoral decline at the 2007 legislative and presidential elections, 2011 marked a changing of the guard at the FN, with Jean-Marie Le Pen replaced by his daughter Marine Le Pen. Under its new leadership, the party has undergone a long-term period of *dédiabolisation*,³⁷⁵ toning down the party's language, expelling extreme figures – including her father Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2015 – and presenting a more moderate face to voters.³⁷⁶

This shift culminated in the 2018 rebranding of the FN as the *Rassemblement National* (RN). These changes have greatly improved the electoral viability of the party, with seat totals jumping from eight in 2017 to 89 in 2022 and 123 in 2024. The RN is therefore now the largest individual party in the National Assembly.³⁷⁷

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the question of RN's apparent modernisation remains highly contentious in French politics. The party has moderated its policy prospectus in some areas – for example it has dropped its previous opposition to civil unions for same-sex couples and has removed the death penalty from its platform. However, its core, hardline positions on immigration and national identity remain

374. Knapp, *Parties and the Party System in France*, 289-95.

375. *Dédiabolisation*: De-demonisation or normalisation. Coined by FN leaders in the late eighties, but intensified under Marine Le Pen, this term refers to the long-term strategy to shed the party's pariah status and become more acceptable to a broader electorate. As explored in this chapter, this strategy remains controversial, with critics arguing that it is mainly cosmetic, obscuring the persistence of far-right ideologies beneath a more palatable surface.

376. Yann Bouchez, "« Dédiabolisation » dans « Le Monde », une stratégie gagnante pour le Rassemblement national", *Le Monde*, 26 November 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/m-le-mag/article/2023/11/26/dediabolisation-dans-le-monde-une-strategie-gagnante-pour-le-rassemblement-national_6202443_4500055.html.

377. "Législatives 2024 : résultats définitifs et composition de la nouvelle Assemblée", Vie Publique Fr, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/294809-legislatives-2024-resultats-et-composition-de-la-nouvelle-assemblee> (2024); "Législatives 2022 : résultats définitifs et composition de la nouvelle Assemblée", Vie Publique Fr, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/285441-legislatives-2022-resultats-definitifs-et-composition-de-lassemblee> (2022); "Les élections législatives de 2017", Vie Publique Fr, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/286001-resultats-des-elections-legislatives-2017> (2017).

much unchanged. Debates therefore continue about whether RN's modernisation has been genuine or is purely cosmetic, with many continuing to refer to the party as far-right.³⁷⁸

In the interests of consistency, this report refers to RN as populist right, distinguishing it from the far-right FN. However, it is important to recognise that such labels are imperfect and cannot fully capture the nuances of this transition.

While the French centre-right has long been split between liberal and conservative poles, these divisions have been increasingly aggravated by the socially conservative influence of the FN and RN. This recently came to a head in June 2024 when LR leader Éric Ciotti triggered a party split by announcing a controversial electoral partnership with a resurgent RN. However, the populist right's damaging influence long predates RN's recent surge in electoral significance and in many ways has been aggravated by actions taken within the French centre-right.

First, before coming to the FN/RN itself, it is important to recognise that the centre-right's broad coalition has been strained by diverging social attitudes in post-war France. On the one hand, in line with American political scientist Ronald Inglehart's theory of the "silent revolution," economic prosperity in post-war western Europe caused a socially liberal value change for much of the middle classes as basic and immediate needs became universally satisfied allowing people to 'silently' shift to focusing on more long-term, values-based needs.³⁷⁹ This was particularly evident among France's centre-right voters during the nineties: although conservative attitudes towards immigration remained fairly stable, "support for socially conservative values was beginning to decline."³⁸⁰ Conversely, European societies also witnessed

378. For example see: Nicholas Vinocur, "How Le Pen turned respectable (and why you shouldn't be fooled)", Politico, 12 February 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/marine-le-pen-turned-respectable-france-presidential-election/>.

379. Roland Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

380. Evans and Ivaldi, "France: Party System Change and the Demise of the Post-Gaullist Right" (2021), 131.

the simultaneous hardening of attitudes among the rural and lower-income sections of the centre-right voter-base who felt left behind – both economically and culturally – by elites’ progressive shift away from conservatism.³⁸¹ This inverse reaction – labelled the “silent counter-revolution” by Italian political scientist Piero Ignazi³⁸² – hit France in the late eighties and nineties as a series of cultural crises “reintroduced the nation and nationalism into mainstream French politics.”³⁸³ One prominent example was the 1989 *affaire du foulard*³⁸⁴ – a controversy concerning the wearing of Islamic coverings in public – which became a focal point for broader concerns about *communautarisme*, integration and cultural identity.³⁸⁵

There is also a significant economic dimension to this polarisation. Those implicated in the ‘silent counter-revolution’ also felt that their plight was connected to the economic consequences of globalisation. While the centre-right remained committed to liberal economic policies and free trade, the FN was able to adapt by embracing economic nationalism, placing protectionism at the forefront of its policy agenda and attributing issues such as unemployment to European integration.³⁸⁶ This transition from previous liberal positions to more left-leaning economic policies – a phenomenon known as *gaucholepénisme*³⁸⁷ – enhanced the appeal of FN by promising ultimately unachievable economic benefits to disaffected voters.

381. Piero Ignazi, “The silent counter-revolution: Hypotheses on the emergence of extreme right-wing parties in Europe”, *European Journal of Political Research*, 22.1 (1992), 3-34.

382. *Ibid.*

383. The *affaire du foulard* refers to controversies over Muslim headscarves in public schools, starting in 1989. Rooted in debates over secularism (*laïcité*), it led to laws banning conspicuous religious symbols in schools (2004) and face-covering veils in public (2010), sparking ongoing tensions over religious freedom and integration; Chabal and Behrent, “Between Neoliberalism and the Nation”, 520.

384. *Affaire du foulard*: Islamic scarf controversy.

385. This was a heated national debate on secularism sparked by high-profile exclusions of Muslim schoolgirls for wearing headscarves in public schools, see Camille Bichler, “30 ans de l’affaire du foulard de Creil : le voile de la discorde”, 3 October 2019, France Culture, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/30-ans-de-l-affaire-du-foulard-de-creil-le-voile-de-la-discorde-7058333>.

386. James Shields, *The extreme right in France: from Pétain to Le Pen* (New York City, NY: Taylor & Francis Books, 2007), 274.

387. *Gaucholepénisme*. A term which emerged in the nineties to describe the convergence between the FN’s nationalist rhetoric and left-wing economic protectionism. The term is a portmanteau of *gauchisme* (leftism) and *Le Pen*, highlighting how the FN was attracting working-class voters who traditionally supported the left, by adopting policies such as opposition to free trade, defense of public services, and economic nationalism.

Caught between the two opposing forces of the silent revolution and counter-revolution, the French centre-right found itself in a difficult situation. Indeed, as the UMP followed a policy agenda more in line with the FN on social issues, they began to marginalise many of their moderate voters who instead tended increasingly towards cultural liberalisation and support for the EU.³⁸⁸

This opened up the electoral space for alternative centrist candidates – first Bayrou, then Macron – who were able to poach the estranged socially liberal elements of what was once the UMP umbrella.³⁸⁹ Indeed, despite his socialist background, almost a quarter of Macron's support in the first round of the 2017 presidential election came from voters who had supported Sarkozy in 2012.³⁹⁰ Furthermore, 21% of voters who had supported François Fillon – LR's presidential candidate in 2017 – switched to support Macron's party at the legislative elections the following month.³⁹¹ This trend continued into the first round of the 2022 elections where 34% of Fillon's 2017 supporters voted for Macron, compared to just 25% for LR's own candidate, Valérie Pécresse.³⁹²

In one sense, Macron's ability to exploit the political space vacated by the UMP/LR provided a temporary relief for the French centre-right, bringing it back into power under a centrist label. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that this moderate faction represents another pole of the centre-right, rather than its new centre of gravity. Indeed, as Macronism reaches the end of its lifespan, the centre-right remains scattered across a broad diaspora. This illustrates the long-term divisive impact of the populist right which has pushed certain factions towards the centre and drawn others to the right, undermining the chances of a united centre-right bloc.

388. Evans and Ivaldi, "France: Party System Change and the Demise of the Post-Gaullist Right" (2021), 114.

389. Jocelyn Evans and Gilles Ivaldi, *The 2017 French Presidential Elections: A Political Reformation?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

390. Pierre Bréchon, "Qui sont les électeurs d'Emmanuel Macron et du mouvement La République en marche ?", <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01810776/document> (2018) 7.

391. Ibid, 8.

392. Anthony Audureau, "Présidentielle: les électeurs de Fillon en 2017 ont plus voté pour Macron que pour Pécresse", BFM TV, 11 April 2022, https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/elections/presidentielle/presidentielle-les-electeurs-de-fillon-en-2017-ont-plus-vote-pour-macron-que-pour-pecresse_AV-202204100498.html.

However, the centre-right also played a role in its own fragmentation in legitimising and then losing control of the populist narrative.³⁹³ It would be wrong to suggest that centre-right parties should not respond to genuine popular concerns about immigration and public security – immigration, for example, was the second biggest vote decider in the 2024 legislative elections, behind purchasing power.³⁹⁴ Nonetheless, the way in which centre-right parties cooperated with the populist right and borrowed its inflammatory rhetoric worsened what was already a difficult situation.

First – as previously mentioned – centre-right parties and governments have sometimes boosted the appeal of the FN or RN by undertaking opportunistic policy shifts that mirror and legitimise populist positions. This was the case with Chirac's Pasqua Law in 1986, and likewise with Sarkozy's aforementioned war on delinquency.³⁹⁵ Despite alignment with centre-right principles, the visible opportunism and reactive nature of such shifts have made them appear as concessions to the FN/RN, rather than genuine, values-based policy decisions. This problem of policy framing continues to the present with Bruno Retailleau's ongoing calls for a referendum on immigration – Retailleau continues to argue that the French people should be directly consulted on immigration policy to get around EU law constraints and constitutional limitations on effective action.³⁹⁶ This policy responds to genuine concerns – 63% of the French population feel there are too many immigrants in France, a figure that has not dropped below 50% since 2009 – however, the idea of a referendum on this issue clearly reflects long-standing FN/

393. Evans and Ivaldi, "France: Party System Change and the Demise of the Post-Gaullist Right" (2021), 113–14.

394. Emma Ferrand, "Élections législatives : pouvoir d'achat, immigration... quels thèmes ont le plus pesé dans les choix de vote ?", *Le Figaro*, 1 July 2024, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/legislatives/elections-legislatives-pouvoir-d-achat-immigration-quels-themes-ont-le-plus-pese-dans-les-choix-de-vote-20240701>.

395. "Sarkozy franchit une nouvelle étape dans sa "guerre" contre la délinquance", *France 24*, 30 July 2010, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20100730-sarkozy-nouvelle-etape-guerre-delinquance-decheance-nationalite-grenoble>.

396. Madeleine Meteyer, "Immigration : Bruno Retailleau veut «redonner la parole aux Français» via un référendum", *Le Figaro*, 8 February 2025, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/bruno-retailleau-tel-qu-il-est-applique-le-droit-met-en-echec-la-volonte-de-l-etat-20250208>.

RN demands.³⁹⁷ Jean-Marie Le Pen already called for a referendum on immigration back in 2010, and the idea was a core demand of Marine Le Pen's presidential campaign in 2022.³⁹⁸ Such a call therefore gives the impression that rather than generating new, recognisably centre-right policy solutions, LR is simply jumping on the bandwagon of its populist opponents and so has nothing original to offer.

This dual effect – boosting the populist right and alienating liberal supporters – is also linked to the centre-right's tendency to radicalise its discourse in line with the messaging of the FN/RN.³⁹⁹ One prominent example of this rhetorical shift is Chirac's 1991 criticism of *le bruit et l'odeur*⁴⁰⁰ of immigrants in an infamous speech to members of his party, the *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR).⁴⁰¹ Chirac's words have since been matched by other centre-right politicians and commentators. Giscard d'Estaing, for example, responded to a 1992 survey on immigration with the words, "the type of problem we are facing is turning from one of immigration to one of invasion."⁴⁰² Likewise, Sarkozy as Minister of the Interior during France's 2005 riots⁴⁰³ referred to youths involved – many of whom were of immigrant origin – as *racaille*,⁴⁰⁴ suggesting that their neighbourhoods needed "cleaning out with a Kärcher," referring to a well-known brand of pressure hose.⁴⁰⁵

While it is difficult to measure the direct impact of such rhetorical

397. "Part des Français estimant qu'il y a trop d'immigrés en France entre 2009 et 2025", Statista, <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/661665/francais-adhesion-trop-immigres-france/> (2025).

398. Guillaume Perrault, "Le Pen réclame un référendum sur l'immigration", *Le Figaro*, 7 January 2010, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2010/01/07/01002-20100107ARTFIG00006-le-pen-reclame-un-referendum-sur-l-immigration.php>; "France's Le Pen proposes referendum on immigration if elected president", Reuters, 27 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/frances-le-pen-proposes-referendum-immigration-if-elected-president-2021-09-27/>.

399. Knapp, *Parties and the Party System in France*, 294.

400. *Le bruit et l'odeur*: The noise and the smell.

401. Nicolas Berrod, "Chirac et «le bruit et l'odeur»: les dessous d'une phrase polémique", *Le Parisien*, 27 September 2019, <https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/chirac-et-le-bruit-et-l-odeur-les-dessous-d-une-phrase-qui-fait-tache-27-09-2019-8161077.php>.

402. Yves Lavoine, "Invasion: du scandale à la banalisation", *Hommes et Migrations*, 1157 (1992), 33-37 34.

403. This was a three-week period of nation-wide civil unrest linked to police harassment and youth unemployment.

404. *Racaille*: Scum or rabble. The translation of this term varies based on context, but in French political and media discourse it is highly pejorative and used to refer to people considered as delinquents or troublemakers, often from marginalized urban areas.

405. Sheila Pulham, "Inflammatory language", 8 November 2005, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/blog/2005/nov/08/inflammatoryla>.

shifts, their effects are widely visible in a cultural sense. Both *racaille* and *le bruit et l'odeur* have since become cultural motifs in French film and music, and are used to evoke the racism of mainstream politics, particularly on the centre-right.⁴⁰⁶

Further, the use of such discourse since the nineties has allowed the FN/RN to increasingly attack the centre-right with the phrase “the French will always prefer the original to the copy” – words originally attributed to FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in response to Chirac’s aforementioned speech.⁴⁰⁷ Unless the centre-right presents a unique offering, rather than merely parroting the populist right, voters have little reason to vote for the “copy” over the “original.” It is worth noting that in recent years, French centre-right rhetoric has been partly drawn in this populist direction as a result of major shifts in France’s media landscape, as explained in Box 4.5.

Box. 4.5. Rightward shifts in the French mainstream media

In the past decade, part of the mainstreaming of populist right rhetoric in French public discourse can be attributed to significant changes in France’s media landscape. At the heart of these shifts is the influence of French business tycoon Vincent Bolloré – a figure widely compared to Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch – who has acquired and transformed large parts of the nation’s legacy media.

One example of this is the Canal+ Group – a global media and entertainment company which has a dominant position in the French media landscape as the leading pay-TV operator. Since Bolloré took control of the group in 2015 he has fundamentally changed its political content. These changes are exemplified in the case of Canal+’s news channel iTélé, where Bolloré ownership saw the departure of three-quarters of

406. For example, see <https://www.lejournalatoulousain.fr/bqe/bruit-et-odeur-comment-jacques-chirac-inspire-zebda-69275/>

407. ““Le bruit et l’odeur” de Jacques Chirac”, INA, 28 April 2022, https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclair-actu/video/s1152333_001/le-bruit-et-l-odeur-de-jacques-chirac.

its editorial staff.⁴⁰⁸ The channel was subsequently relaunched as CNews with a much more right-wing editorial line. Now the most-watched news channel in France, CNews has helped to amplify far-right voices such as Eric Zemmour who was able to launch a presidential bid off the back of his daily programme on CNews (2019-21). While ultimately finishing fourth in the election's first round, Zemmour polled as high as 18% in October 2021.⁴⁰⁹

Bolloré's influence has also had a more direct impact on the fortunes of the French centre-right in recent political developments. Following Ciotti's shock announcement of the 2024 LR alliance with RN, French newspaper *Le Monde* revealed that Bolloré had played a central role in orchestrating the union.⁴¹⁰ This plan reflects Bolloré's long term project of uniting LR with the French populist right – referred to as *l'union des droites*⁴¹¹ – an ambition which, if realised, would fundamentally undermine any chances of the centre-right winning back the more liberal wing of its diaspora.⁴¹²

It is also worth noting that, on certain occasions, the French centre-right has aided the FN/RN more tangibly through electoral cooperation. This was the case with the UMP's tendency towards a 'ni-ni' (neither nor) approach, first used during the 2011 local elections. There, in second round run-offs between the FN and a left-wing candidate, UMP

408. Alexis Lévrier, "« La crise politique que nous vivons prouve la réussite du combat civilisationnel mené par Vincent Bolloré »", *The Conversation*, 28 June 2024, <https://theconversation.com/la-crise-politique-que-nous-vivons-prouve-la-reussite-du-combat-civilisationnel-mene-par-vincent-bollore-232457>.

409. "CNews passe en tête des chaînes d'info, détrônant BFM-TV", *Le Monde*, 3 juin 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2024/06/03/cnews-passe-en-tete-des-chaines-d-info-detronant-bfm-tv_6237087_823448.html; "Zemmour en position de se qualifier au 2nd tour, selon un sondage Harris Interactive/Challenges", *Challenges*, https://www.challenges.fr/top-news/zemmour-en-position-de-se-qualifier-au-2nd-tour-selon-un-sondage-harris-interactive-challenges_783607 (2021).

410. Raphaëlle Bacqué, "Comment Eric Ciotti a orchestré avec Vincent Bolloré l'annonce de son ralliement au RN", *Le Monde*, 13 June 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2024/06/13/comment-eric-ciotti-a-orchestre-avec-vincent-bollore-l-annonce-de-son-ralliement-au-rn_6239404_823448.html.

411. Union des droites: Union of the rights. Phrase used to refer to the strategic collaboration – or at least the normalisation of cooperation – between mainstream conservative parties and far right or populist right parties.

412. Benjamin Dodman, "Comment Bolloré et son empire médiatique ont porté l'extrême droite aux portes du pouvoir", *France 24*, 2 July 2024, <https://www.france24.com/fr/france/20240702-comment-bollor%C3%A9-et-son-empire-m%C3%A9diatique-ont-port%C3%A9-l'extr%C3%Aame-droite-aux-portes-du-pouvoir>.

voters were encouraged to abstain.⁴¹³ This approach – repeated at the 2015 local elections – indirectly favoured the FN and arguably further banalised its leaders, fostering significantly closer interactions between the centre-right and a party that in 2011 and 2015 remained deeply associated with antisemitism, Holocaust denial and inflammatory rhetoric on race and immigration.⁴¹⁴

The future trajectory of the French populist right remains uncertain. On the one hand, the party's vote is showing some signs of crystallisation, shifting from being a vote of protest to one of loyalty. Seventy-seven percent of RN voters made their decision in the 2024 European elections out of active support for the party (...*avant tout par adhésion*⁴¹⁵) rather than due to the lack of a better alternative (...*avant tout par défaut*⁴¹⁶).⁴¹⁷ Likewise, in the 2024 legislative election, when asked to list the main reasons for their RN vote, just 25% of people cited frustration with the incumbent president and government. This is as compared to 50% citing agreement with the party's stance on immigration and 43% citing their better understanding of people.⁴¹⁸

However, much of the French population also retain their longstanding aversion for the RN. In a poll from November 2023, 66% of voters repudiated the party as “profoundly antisemitic.”⁴¹⁹ Likewise, in August 2024, 54% of voters saw the RN as a party that stirs up violence and 53% as one that is dangerous for democracy.⁴²⁰ Furthermore, in March 2025, Marine Le Pen was convicted of embezzlement, a verdict which excludes her from contesting the presidency in 2027 and may

413. Alexandre Lemarié, “UMP : comment le « ni-ni » s'est imposé”, *Le Monde*, 4 February 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2015/02/04/ump-comment-le-ni-ni-s-est-impose_4569763_823448.html.

414. Evans and Ivaldi, “France: Party System Change and the Demise of the Post-Gaullist Right” (2021), 134.

415. *Avant tout par adhésion*: Above all out of support.

416. *Avant tout par défaut*: Above all by default.

417. “Enquête Électorale Française: Elections Législatives 2024: juin 2024 – Vague 6”, Ipsos, https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr/cevipof/files/Ipsos_Panel_Vague_juin2024.pdf (2024) 51.

418. “Enquête Électorale Française: Elections Législatives 2024: août 2024 – Vague 7”, 14.

419. Pascal Perrineau, “THE MOMENTUM OF THE RASSEMBLEMENT NATIONAL AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE JUNE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS”, SciencesPo CEVIPOF, https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr/cevipof/files/Noteelectionseuropeennes_PP_dynamiqueRN_mai2024_VA_V3.pdf (2024) 5.

420. “Enquête Électorale Française: Elections Législatives 2024: août 2024 – Vague 7”, Ipsos, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-08/ipsos-enquete-electorale-francaise-2024-vague-7-rapport-complet-WEB.pdf> (2024) 30.

undermine RN's electoral appeal, at least in the short term.⁴²¹

However, one potential warning sign for the centre-right is the electoral trajectory of young voters. The RN's success in sanitising its image among young voters was evident during the 2024 European elections. Then, almost a third of 18-25-year-old voters declared their intention to vote for the RN, nearly double the support level of any other group.⁴²² This victory was overturned at the legislative elections by the *Nouveau Front Populaire*⁴²³ (NFP) – a broad left-wing coalition bloc formed in 2024 including the radical left *La France Insoumise*⁴²⁴ (LFI), the *Parti Socialiste* (PS), *Les Écologistes*⁴²⁵ (LE) and the *Parti Communiste*⁴²⁶ (PCF). However, the RN still won 33% support among 18-24-year-olds, as compared to 9% for *Ensemble* and just 4% for LR.⁴²⁷ One important element in this phenomenon has been the populist right's ability to appeal to young voters through much greater social media reach, a factor explored in Box 4.6.

421. Adam Parsons, "Marine Le Pen's political career is in tatters after being found guilty of embezzlement", Sky News, 31 March 2025, <https://news.sky.com/story/marine-le-pens-political-career-is-in-tatters-after-being-found-guilty-of-embezzlement-13339329>.

422. "Les jeunes et les élections européennes de 2024", IFOP, [https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-jeunes-et-les-elections-europeennes-de-2024/#~:text=En \(2024\)](https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-jeunes-et-les-elections-europeennes-de-2024/#~:text=En (2024)).

423. Nouveau Front Populaire: New Popular Front.

424. La France Insoumise: France Unbowed or France in Revolt.

425. Les Écologistes: The Ecologists.

426. Parti Communiste: Communist Party.

427. Ariel Guez, "Résultats élections législatives 2024: âge, diplômes, revenus... Comment ont voté les Français", BFM TV, 1 July 2024, https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/elections/legislatives/resultats-elections-legislatives-2024-age-diplomes-revenus-comment-ont-vote-les-francais_AV-202406300567.html.

Box 4.6. The French centre-right on social media

Chart 4.1. Total follower count by party (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X)

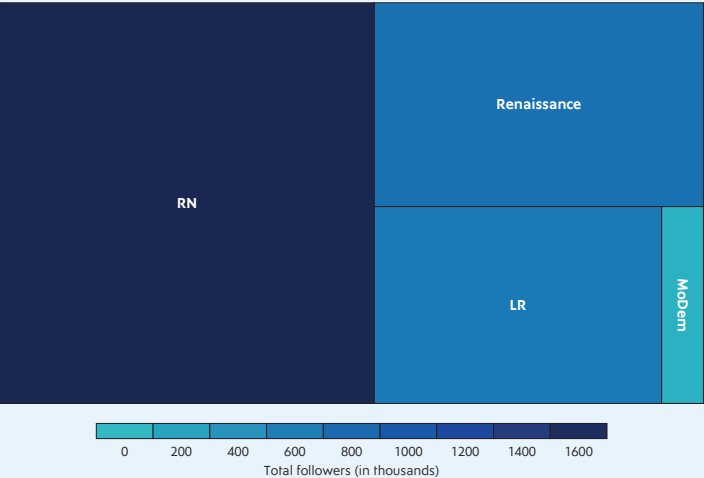
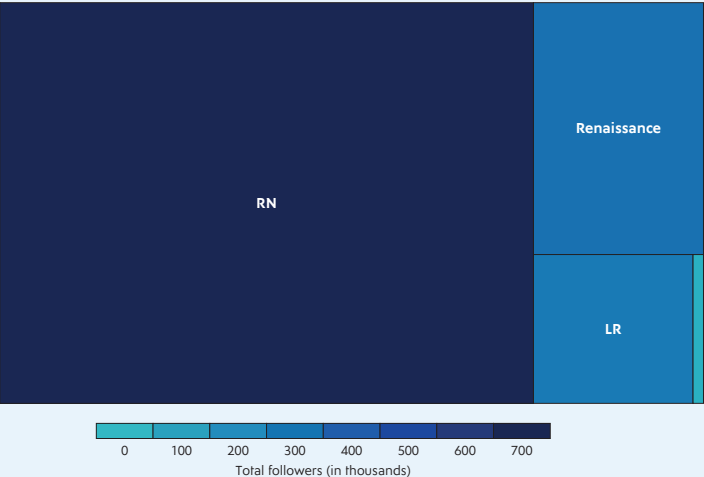


Chart 4.2. Total follower count by party (Instagram and TikTok)



Source: facebook.com; instagram.com; tiktok.com; x.com.

Chart 4.3. Total follower count by individual (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X)

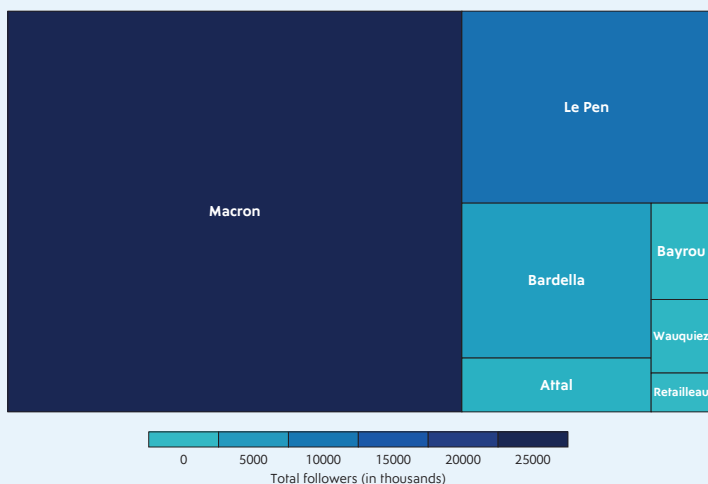
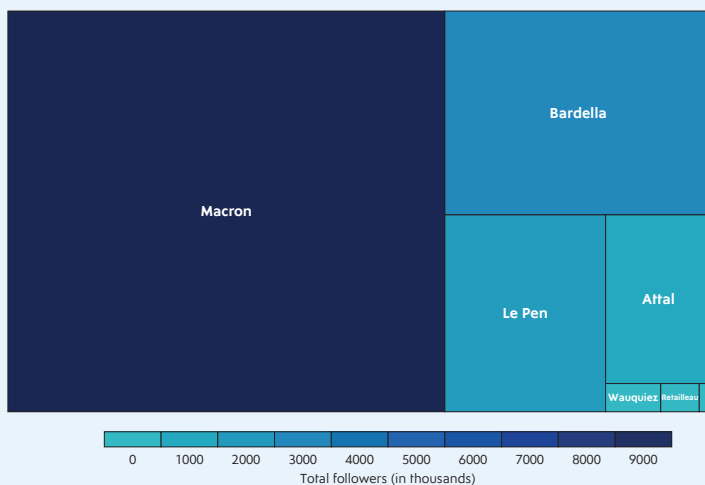


Chart 4.4. Total follower count by party (Instagram and TikTok)



Source: facebook.com; instagram.com; tiktok.com; x.com.

Charts 4.1 and 4.3 represent the combined follower counts of political parties and figures across the four largest social media platforms in France by usage (excluding YouTube, Snapchat and Pinterest for their lack of direct relevance as campaigning tools).⁴²⁸

President Macron is a clear outlier, showing a broad appeal across all platforms, with these numbers likely boosted by the prestige and international draw of being the head of state since 2017. However – putting Macron to one side – this data reveals a clear divide between a populist right that is reaching wide audiences across its social media platforms and a centre-right that is failing to match this level of engagement. While LR and *Renaissance* have combined follower counts of 629,000 and 730,000 respectively, RN's total is more than double their size at over 1.6 million. At the individual level, the divide is even more stark. Marine Le Pen and RN Party President Jordan Bardella have respective follower counts of 6.4 million and 4 million. The nearest centre-right rival, former prime minister Gabriel Attal, has just 1.3 million. LR figures Laurent Wauquiez (leader of LR's parliamentary group) and Bruno Retailleau (LR party president) sit even further back at 607,000 and 305,000 respectively.

Most concerning is that this contrast becomes especially apparent if we concentrate on the platforms most used by young people: Instagram and TikTok, as shown in Charts 4.2 and 4.4.⁴²⁹ Bardella more than triples the count of Attal, the most followed centre-right contender aside from Macron, and the RN has almost five times the follower count of *Renaissance* – the most popular of the centre-right parties.

428. Figures based on author's calculations using official public accounts, measured in March 2025; "Classement des réseaux sociaux et messageries instantanées ayant le plus fort taux de pénétration en France en 2024", Statista, <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/491792/france-reseaux-sociaux-messageries-instantanees-penetration/> (2025).

429. "Réseaux sociaux préférés des jeunes en France 2024", Statista, <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/1219169/utilisation-reseaux-sociaux-jeunes-adultes-france/#?text=Instagram%20%C3%A9tait%20le%20%C3%A9seau%20social,plateforme%20de%20partage%20de%20photos> (2025).

RN is seemingly proving successful in translating a strong social media following into votes, particularly through the charismatic figure of Jordan Bardella. This 29-year-old party president has developed a strong online media presence and is widely credited with boosting the RN's youth vote.⁴³⁰ Populist parties' sensationalist, humouristic social media strategies are often ill-suited to centre-right parties' brand as policy-driven, sensible parties of government. Nonetheless, this does not excuse the centre-right's failure to cultivate an engaged online following. A significant part of Bardella's recent success has come from an effective normalisation strategy, presenting himself as a regular person with whom people can empathise; an effect achieved for example through simple 'behind the scenes' clips of the politician eating sweets or playing Playstation.⁴³¹

At both an ideological and rhetorical level there is a clear need for centre-right parties to create a stronger distinction from the RN. As the centre-right lost rural and working class voters to the FN and then the RN, it has increasingly adopted the rhetoric of populist right in order to recreate their success reaching these electorates. This approach has only served to embolden the centre-right's populist opponents while simultaneously alienating moderate supporters. Going forward, the centre-right will need to learn from populist parties' methods in reaching disillusioned voters – particularly through digital communications – while drawing clear red lines in terms of policy, rhetoric and values.

430. "How France's far-right is winning the TikTok battle", France 24, 21 June 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240621-how-france-s-far-right-is-winning-the-tiktok-battle>; Marie Neihouser, "Jordan Bardella et TikTok : histoire éphémère ou stratégie politique payante ?", 17 June 2024, <https://theconversation.com/jordan-bardella-et-tiktok-histoire-ephemere-ou-strategie-politique-payante-232575>.

431. Olivier Clairouin, "Comment expliquer le succès de Jordan Bardella sur TikTok ?", *Le Monde*, 5 July 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2024/07/05/comment-expliquer-le-succes-de-jordan-bardella-sur-tiktok_6246964_4408996.html.

Leaders' inability to foster unity

Another key challenge for the French centre-right is weak leadership – namely its leaders' recurring inability to rally their various parties and factions into a single movement or around a single presidential candidate.

As mentioned earlier in this Chapter, De Gaulle's incoherent philosophy laid weak foundations for future leaders seeking to unite the centre-right and failed to establish clear policy positions on key topics, particularly where national sovereignty was concerned. This problematic inheritance was matched by further leadership shortcomings during the years of convergence that followed.

One noteworthy example of this is Giscard d'Estaing's failure to establish a new, more cohesive centre-right through cooperation with the Gaullist RPR. Despite clear rapprochement on policy and values, explained above, Giscard d'Estaing proved unable to contain fierce competition within the centre-right.⁴³² In particular, the President failed to manage an internal rivalry with the RPR's Jacques Chirac who resigned from his position as Prime Minister in 1976 before challenging Giscard D'Estaing in the 1981 presidential election with no set arrangement for centre-right cooperation in the second round. Subsequently, when Chirac was knocked out, one quarter of his support was lost to abstention or to Mitterrand, thus helping the socialist candidate to triumph despite trailing in the first round.⁴³³ Indeed, this failure to establish a cooperative relationship with the Gaullists was described by the political scientists Howard Machin and Vincent Wright as "the greatest single strategic weakness of President Giscard d'Estaing."⁴³⁴

The years of UMP dominance between 2002 and 2012 seemingly buck this trend, with the centre-right presenting a united front under the leadership of Chirac and then Sarkozy. However, it is important to

432. Knapp, *Parties and the Party System in France*, 80.

433. *Ibid*, 82.

434. Howard Machin and Vincent Wright, "Why Mitterrand Won," *West European Politics*, 5.1 (1982), 7-35 (9).

recognise the long-term impacts of UMP leaders' inability to manage different factions within this briefly coherent centre-right.⁴³⁵

The original ambition of the UMP's founders when bringing the centre-right together in 2002 was for a broad church model of party with a culture of debate – akin to what the CDU/CSU was for the German right until the electoral breakthrough of AfD in the 2010s.⁴³⁶ The UMP's proposed framework of internal *mouvements*,⁴³⁷ designed to facilitate this productive atmosphere – and enshrined in the party statutes in 2002 – was rapidly sidelined and only revived in 2012 as a panicked, divisive response to the volatility that followed Sarkozy's defeat in the 2012 presidential election.⁴³⁸ The formation of the UMP had offered a major opportunity to resolve the centre-right's longstanding fractures and create a coherent umbrella party. Leaders neglecting this framework and relying instead on their unifying force as individuals was a short-sighted decision which contributed to the UMP's future fragmentation.⁴³⁹

This overreliance on individual leaders who have failed to establish stable party structures adds much greater significance to the internal leadership crises that have plagued the centre-right since Sarkozy. In 2012, large-scale fraud during internal voting discredited the party's practice of natural, internal candidate selection.⁴⁴⁰ In 2017, François Fillon's campaign was likewise derailed by the 'Penelopegate' corruption scandal in which he was accused of using public funds to pay his wife and children for fake parliamentary jobs, again building mistrust for the

435. Florence Haegel, "The transformation of the French Right: Institutional imperatives and organizational changes", *French Politics*, 2.2 (2004), 185-202 (189).

436. *Ibid.*, 188.

437. *Mouvements: Movements*.

438. "L'UMP divisée sur la création de "mouvements" au sein du parti", *Le Monde*, 2 May 2012, https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2012/article/2012/05/02/l-ump-divisee-sur-la-creation-de-mouvements-au-sein-du-parti_1694546_1471069.html.

439. Jean-Félix de Bujadoux and Christian Gambotti, *La révolution politique chiraquienne: l'union de la droite et du centre* (Paris: Hachette, 2003).

440. Rémi Lefebvre and Eric Treille, "The introduction of open primaries among Les Républicains and the Parti socialiste: The weight of the 2011 precedent and organizational bricolage (2016-17)", *Revue française de science politique*, 67.6 (2017), 1167-1185 (1174).

French centre-right's internal selection processes.⁴⁴¹ Similarly, Valérie Pécresse's victory in the 2021 LR primaries was marred by scandals including accusations of fake votes, contributing to the party's lowest ever result in the first round of a presidential election; it won just 4.8% of the vote in the 2022 contest.⁴⁴²

On the more moderate wing of the centre-right, Macron has been able to hold his movement together since 2017. However, as the President approaches the end of his two-term limit in 2027, issues of succession are now also arising in his faction. Various figures from within *Renaissance* hope to succeed Macron, including former Prime Minister Gabriel Attal and current Justice Minister Gérald Darmanin. However, no clear successor is forthcoming at this stage, and in a party so strongly associated with an individual leader, it remains deeply uncertain whether Macronism will survive after Macron.

The situation for the next presidential election – whether this comes in 2027 or earlier – is further complicated by the fact that candidates from LR and *Renaissance* will also have to compete with the centre-right hopefuls outside of these two main blocs. Most notable is the former Prime Minister Édouard Philippe, currently leader of the *Horizons et Indépendants* group, who is seeking to rally *Renaissance*, MoDem and LR to his presidential bid.⁴⁴³

441. Angélique Chrisafis, "Penelopegate' casts dark shadow over Fillon's presidential prospects", *The Guardian*, 27 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/27/penelope-gate-casts-dark-shadow-over-fillons-presidential-prospects>.

442. Dominique Albertini et al., "Adhérents morts, fictifs ou fantoques: Pécresse victorieuse d'une élection bidon", *Libération*, 23 February 2022, https://www.liberation.fr/politique/elections/adherents-morts-fictifs-ou-fantoques-pecresse-victorieuse-dune-election-bidon-20220223_AHAJBNMGR5BTFLQSLQLOIVSBCNGM/; Antton Rouget, "Des électeurs étrangers derrière la victoire de Valérie Pécresse," *Mediapart*, 9 December 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/091221/des-electeurs-etrangeurs-derriere-la-victoire-de-valerie-pecresse>.

443. "Édouard Philippe appelle au «rassemblement» du «bloc central» pour les prochaines élections", *franceinfo*, 26 January 2025, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/edouard-philippe/edouard-philippe-appelle-au-rassemblement-du-bloc-central-pour-les-prochaines-elections_7038104.html.

Conclusion

External factors – particularly influence from the populist right – have done serious damage to the fragile coalition of the French centre-right. However, internal crises of leadership have also played a consistent role in undermining this bloc's ability to present a united and effective political front against such threats. The current lack of a clear centre-right presidential candidate serves to illustrate this today. If unresolved, the problem is likely to hamstring any attempts to seize the initiative at the next round of presidential and legislative elections.

The next Chapter in this report will focus on the philosophy, history and challenges faced by the centre-right in Poland.

Chapter Five:

The centre-right in Poland

Having outlined the tenets and history of the centre-right in France, this Chapter turns to Poland. It first defines the Polish centre-right before tracking its history since the fall of Polish communism in 1989 and ends by exploring its three most significant contemporary challenges.

What is the Polish centre-right?

As we will see, the Polish centre-right is characterised by its anti-communism and religiosity. It is also supportive of the legacy of the radical pro-market, economically liberal reforms of Poland's first post-communist Finance Minister, Leszek Balcerowicz. This becomes immediately apparent when we examine the very first years of Poland's post-communist political history.

However, what also becomes apparent over the course of the first couple of decades of Polish post-communist history is that the Polish centre-right is impossible to pinpoint in party political terms.

Key parties of the Polish centre-right

Unlike in other Chapters, it is impossible to outline the key parties representative of the Polish centre-right. Of the parties previously associated with the Polish centre-right, some have gone extinct while others have been the subject of profound philosophical shifts, and parties now associated with the centre-right have non-centre-right

foundations. In a country with a plethora of political parties – fourteen different parties sit in the *Sejm*, the lower house of the Polish bicameral parliament⁴⁴⁴ – the Polish centre-right remains split up between various political parties often distinguished more by personal grievances than policy differences. Largely as a result of Polish politicians' tendency to coalesce around personalities rather than philosophies, explained in detail in Box 5.6 much below, of the nine different parliamentary clubs⁴⁴⁵ sitting in the *Sejm*, six⁴⁴⁶ (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*⁴⁴⁷ (PiS), *Koalicja Obywatelska*⁴⁴⁸ (KO), *Polska 2050 – Trzecia Droga*,⁴⁴⁹ *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – Trzecia Droga*,⁴⁵⁰ *Konfederacja*⁴⁵¹ and *Wolni Republikanie*⁴⁵²) are home to some centre-right politicians, and all of them are also home to politicians either further from the centre or closer to the left than the centre-right.

Indeed, as this Chapter shows, Polish parties are incredibly malleable philosophically. The two parties that have dominated Polish politics over the last two decades, PiS and *Platforma Obywatelska*⁴⁵³ (PO), have both moved far from their initial centre-right philosophical foundations, while the largest party that closely aligns with our three centre-right tenets in Poland today – *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*⁴⁵⁴ (PSL) – operated between 1949 and 1989 as a pro-communist agrarian party under a different name. Therefore, the only way to define the Polish centre-right is to look at individual politicians and policies throughout Poland's post-1989 history that demonstrate an adherence to the Polish centre-right's tenets, which this Chapter goes on to define now.

A further complication is that, while Poland has political parties just

444. Sejm, "Aktualne kluby i koła", https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm10.nsf/page.xsp/kluby_stat (2025).

445. Ibid.

446. Two of them, *Koalicja Obywatelska* and *Trzecia Droga*, are home to four political parties each.

447. *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*: Law and Justice. Can also mean 'Righteousness and Justice.'

448. *Koalicja Obywatelska*: Civic Coalition.

449. *Polska 2050 – Trzecia Droga*: Poland 2050 – a Third Way.

450. *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – Trzecia Droga*: Polish People's Party – a Third Way. The word 'lud' can also be translated as 'folk' rather than 'people.'

451. *Konfederacja*: Confederation.

452. *Wolni Republikanie*: Free Republicans.

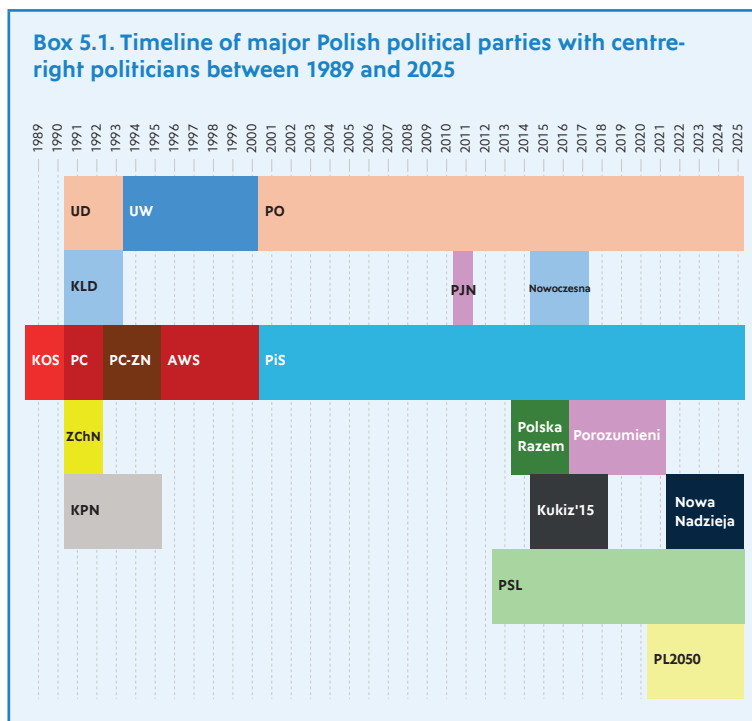
453. *Platforma Obywatelska*: Civic Platform.

454. *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*: Polish People's Party. The word 'lud' can also be translated as 'folk' rather than 'people.'

like all other democracies, it also has parliamentary clubs – while it is possible for them to consist of only a single political party, they are often coalitions of political parties united within the Polish parliament largely in order for smaller parties to be able to make a more meaningful impact as a part of a larger political bloc. This Chapter will generally refer to political parties rather than parliamentary clubs except where parliamentary clubs are particularly relevant or where referring to individual parties only would introduce unnecessary complexity, in which case whether we are referring to a party or to a club will be made clear in this Chapter.

The most important parties among which the Polish centre-right has been fragmented since 1989 can be seen in Box 5.1 below.

Box 5.1. Timeline of major Polish political parties with centre-right politicians between 1989 and 2025



As can be seen, all of the early major parties of the Polish centre-right stem out of *Komitet Obywatelski „Solidarność”*⁴⁵⁵ (KOS). Of the major Polish political mergers of the last 35 years, *Porozumienie Centrum*⁴⁵⁶ (PC) and *Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe*⁴⁵⁷ (ZChN) united in 1993 to form *Porozumienie Centrum-Zjednoczenie Narodowe*⁴⁵⁸ (PC-ZN),⁴⁵⁹ while *Unia Demokratyczna*⁴⁶⁰ (UD) and *Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny*⁴⁶¹ (KLD) united in 1994 to form *Unia Wolności*⁴⁶² (UW). Then, in 1996, PC-ZN reformed into *Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność*⁴⁶³ (AWS), which absorbed a number of smaller parties, including *Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej*⁴⁶⁴ (KPN). Both AWS and UW reformed in 2001, into PiS and PO respectively. *Polska Razem*⁴⁶⁵ also rebranded as *Porozumienie*⁴⁶⁶ in 2017, but faced an internal struggle after 2021, following which it faded into irrelevance. *Polska Jest Najważniejsza*⁴⁶⁷ (PJN) likewise faded into irrelevance after the 2011 parliamentary elections, the same year it was formed, as did Kukiz'15 after the 2019 parliamentary elections. *Nowoczesna*⁴⁶⁸ lost any centre-right appeal by around 2017, while PSL rebranded from a merely agrarian to a centre-right party in 2013 with the election of Janusz Piechociński as leader.

Now, moving onto the philosophy of the Polish centre-right, the three key tenets of the Polish centre-right – anti-communism, religiosity and support for the economically liberal reforms of Balcerowicz – have all been equally evident since the Polish centre-right came onto the political scene.

455. *Komitet Obywatelski „Solidarność”*: Citizens' Committee „Solidarity”.

456. *Porozumienie Centrum*: Centre Agreement.

457. *Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe*: Christian-National Union.

458. *Porozumienie Centrum-Zjednoczenie Narodowe*: Centre Agreement – Polish Unity.

459. *Rzeczpospolita*, “PC i ZChN połączone porażką”, <https://archiwum.rp.pl/arttykul/11257-PC-i-ZChN-polaczone-porazka.html> (1993).

460. *Unia Demokratyczna*: Democratic Union.

461. *Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny*: Liberal-Democratic Congress.

462. *Unia Wolności*: Union of Liberty.

463. *Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność*: Electoral Action Solidarity.

464. *Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej*: Confederation of Independent Poland.

465. *Polska Razem*: Poland Together.

466. *Porozumienie*: Agreement.

467. *Polska Jest Najważniejsza*: Poland is the Most Important.

468. *Nowoczesna*: Modern.

Anti-communism

Almost all Polish centre-right parties post-1989 stem out of *Komitet Obywatelski „Solidarność”* (KOS), the political arm of *Solidarność*,⁴⁶⁹ set up explicitly with the intention of overthrowing the communist PZPR (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*⁴⁷⁰). Multiple key Polish centre-right politicians since 1989, including Aleksander Hall and Donald Tusk, mentioned later in this Chapter, are former anti-communist activists, demonstrating the extent to which opposition to communism weighs large on the history of the centre-right in Poland. As this Chapter goes on to explore, removing communist influence and reforming communist institutions was perceived by multiple centre-right governments as their main mission, while collaboration with communism and former communists was generally abhorred by the Polish centre-right; sometimes to the detriment of pursuing other policy goals.

Anti-communism was a particularly important facet of the Polish centre-right in its early years, but, as the Polish centre-right also shifted to parties that have not stemmed out of KOS – for example *Polska 2050*⁴⁷¹ (PL2050) – or parties that pre-date KOS have changed their policy positions – for example PSL – this anti-communist legacy has lessened in importance. Indeed, over the course of the twenty-first century, anti-communist zeal has gradually morphed into support for the *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita* project,⁴⁷² described in Box 5.7 much below.

Anti-communism is primarily a manifestation of non-cosmopolitanism, insofar as it stems from the Polish centre-right's assertion of Polish sovereignty and an opposition to Soviet control.

Religiosity

It is difficult to overstate the influence of religion, and the Catholic Church in particular, on the Polish centre-right, particularly over

469. *Solidarność*: Solidarity.

470. *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*: United Polish Workers' Party.

471. *Polska 2050*: Poland 2050.

472. *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita*: Fourth Republic.

the course of the late twentieth century; Pope John Paul II was a major source of support for *Solidarność* throughout the eighties and continued to be one of the most influential figures of Polish politics over the course of his lifetime. For example, John Paul II visited Poland twice over the course of the nineties, in 1991 and 1999; he endorsed the post-communist transition in both of his visits and contributed to the political debate. Perhaps most influentially, during a speech he gave in the Polish parliament in 1999,⁴⁷³ he publicly endorsed Poland's ascension into the European Union, as he did again in 2003 addressing a large pilgrimage of Poles to Rome;⁴⁷⁴ that same year, 77.5% of Poles voted in favour of it in a referendum. John Paul II also publicly voiced his support for restrictions on the legality of abortion in Poland and, in 1991, also issued the *Centesimus annus* encyclical, which endorsed capitalism and reaffirmed the right to private property and the legitimate role of profit, but also emphasised that the state needs to play a role in ensuring that the basic needs of all are met.⁴⁷⁵ The encyclical set the stage of for the economic views of the Polish centre-right, particularly when it was trying to moderate the effects of Balcerowicz's economically liberalising reforms. Soon after, in 1993, John Paul II negotiated a Concordat with the then-Prime Minister, Hanna Suchocka of UD, which guaranteed the rights of the Catholic Church in Poland; Poland is only one of nine European countries to have such an agreement with the Catholic Church since the 1953 Spanish Concordat.⁴⁷⁶ Also partly as a consequence of John Paul II's influence, the Polish constitution of 1997 – which replaced the provisional constitution of 1992 and which was designed by the then-governing Polish centre-right, composed of *Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność* (AWS) and

473. Grzegorz Świst, "Europa w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II", <https://cbpe.pl/europa-w-nauczaniu-jana-pawla-ii/> (2023).

474. Iwona Żurek, "20 lat Polski w UE. Dmítrowicz: Jan Paweł II wskazywał, że Europa potrzebuje Polski, a Polska potrzebuje Europy", <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/20-lat-polski-w-ue-dmitrowicz-jan-pawel-ii-wskazywal-ze-europa-potrzebuje-polski-polska> (2024).

475. John Paul II, "Centesimus annus", https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html (1991).

476. The Holy See, "AGREEMENTS OF THE HOLY SEE", https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/index_concordati-accordi_en.htm (2025).

Unia Demokratyczna (UD) – makes multiple explicit references to God, Christianity and the social doctrine of the Catholic Church.⁴⁷⁷

Besides John Paul II, the other influential religious figure in Polish politics during the nineties was Abp Józef Glemp, the effective leader of the Catholic Church in Poland. Over the course of the nineties and early noughties, the Catholic Church served as the go-to mediator for the Polish centre-right and, in September 1990, Polish politicians were hosted by Glemp in order to determine the Polish electoral calendar. Glemp then publicly endorsed the *Solidarność* leader Lech Wałęsa in the second round of the 1990 presidential elections when he stood against the eccentric libertarian Stanisław Tymiański, who belonged to the Libertarian Party of Canada. The impact of Abp Glemp's endorsement was significant: it was one of the reasons why Tymiański received fewer votes in the second round of the election than he received in the first. Glemp later informally advised the centre-right Prime Minister Olszewski when Olszewski was building his cabinet.⁴⁷⁸

According to a 2013 Konrad Adenauer Foundation study, four models of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state are commonplace in Poland, each consistently expressed by different churchmen and politicians throughout Poland's post-1989 history: active participation in and critique of Polish politics by the Church; participation in Polish politics by the Church in a non-critical, gentle way; the Church facilitating a religious public sphere within which secular political dialogue takes place; and complete separation between Church and state. Of these four, the last alone is completely uncharacteristic of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the politicians of the Polish centre-right.⁴⁷⁹

While the extent to which explicit religiosity continues to feature

477. Antoni Dudek, *Speech at the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYVMK8TQgr4>.

478. Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2023* (Warsaw: Znak, 2023).

479. Janusz Węgrzecki et al., "Obecność Kościoła katolickiego w sferze publicznej demokratycznego państwa prawa. Przykład współczesnej Polski", https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=291a976d-0392-a8b6-bc77-df624121a3a0&groupId=252038 (2013).

in Polish centre-right rhetoric declines over the course of the twenty-first century, the relationship between Christianity – and in particular Catholicism – and the Polish centre-right remains strong.

This tenet is the main way in which the core European centre-right principle of conservatism manifests itself in Poland.

Reforms of Balcerowicz

Besides Lech Wałęsa, discussed in detail in Box 5.3 much below, the Polish centre-right's most important figure since 1989 has been Leszek Balcerowicz. An academic rather than a politician at the point at which he was appointed the Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister in September 1989, he kicked off a programme of sweeping economically liberalising reforms according to the doctrine of economic shock therapy,⁴⁸⁰ described in detail later in this Chapter.

While controversial at the time, the positive effects of Balcerowicz's reforms would be felt in the years to come. In 1989, when Polish communists lost power, the average Pole earned less than \$50 a month and was poorer than the average citizen of Gabon or Suriname. Since then, Polish GDP per capita has grown faster than even South Korea and Singapore, the so-called 'Asian Tigers,' and without the added benefit of economies of scale resultant from the rapid growth of a much larger neighbour – China in the case of the Asian Tigers, with South Korean exports to China amounting for around a quarter of South Korea's GDP.⁴⁸¹

Inflation fell by over 350 percentage points between 1990 and 1991 – it peaked at well over 400% in 1990 – and continued to decline steadily, reaching a much more manageable 7% by 1999.⁴⁸² Polish GDP growth turned positive in 1992 and averaged +4.5% a year between 1992 and

480. Leszek Balcerowicz, "Poland: Economic Reforms Under Extraordinary and Normal Politics—An Insider's View", in Paweł Churski and Tomasz Kaczmarek (eds.), *Three Decades of Polish Socio-Economic Transformations: Geographical Perspectives* (New York: Springer, 2022), 7.

481. Marcin Piatkowski, *Europe's Growth Champion: Insights from the Economic Rise of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 125-135.

482. Macrotrends, "Poland Inflation 1971-2025", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/pol/poland/inflation-rate-cpi> (2025).

2007.⁴⁸³ Indeed, Poland is the current holder of the record for the longest period of uninterrupted year-on-year growth in recorded history, having managed 27 years of year-on-year growth between 1992 and 2019.⁴⁸⁴ Poland's GDP per capita increased even faster, increasing rapidly from \$1,731 in 1990 to \$3,687 by 1995 and \$8,022 by 2005; indeed, until between 1989 and 2016, no middle- or high-income country in the world experienced faster GDP per capita growth than Poland.⁴⁸⁵ This was faster than even East Germany, despite East Germany receiving over a trillion dollars of subsidies from West Germany in that period. Between 1989 and 2016, Polish exports also increased, from \$16 billion to almost \$250 billion a year, while Polish productivity shot up by 113% – in that same period, US productivity only increased by 40%, while German by only 28%.⁴⁸⁶ The consequences of this are also reflected in Poland's life expectancy, which shot up from 70.8 years in 1989 to 77.7 years by 2015.⁴⁸⁷ This growth has also been remarkably inclusive – between 1989 and 2016, 100% of the Polish population experienced income growth faster than the G-7 average.⁴⁸⁸ By comparison, the same was true for only around half of Latvia's population⁴⁸⁹ – Latvia being another post-communist country which grew rapidly after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, with 6.7% average annual GDP growth between 1994 and 2007.⁴⁹⁰

Despite their painful short-term effects, Balcerowicz's reforms are one of the proudest legacies of the Polish centre-right and one of the best examples of centre-right policymaking in all European history. Since

483. Macrotrends, "Poland GDP Growth Rate 1991-2025", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/poland/gdp-growth-rate> (2025).

484. Marcin Piatkowski, *Europe's Growth Champion: Insights from the Economic Rise of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 131.

485. Macrotrends, "Poland GDP Per Capita", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/poland/gdp-per-capita> (2025).

486. Marcin Piatkowski, *Europe's Growth Champion: Insights from the Economic Rise of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 125-138.

487. Macrotrends, "Poland Life Expectancy", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/poland/life-expectancy> (2025).

488. Marcin Piatkowski, *Europe's Growth Champion: Insights from the Economic Rise of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 139.

489. Ibid.

490. World Bank, "GDP growth (annual %)", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG> (2025).

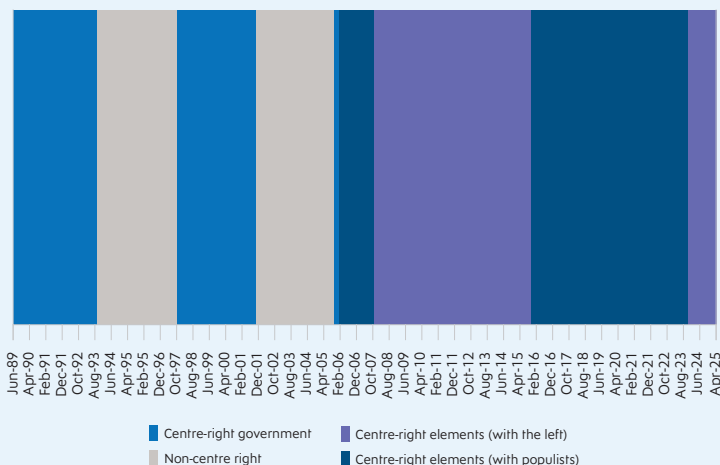
1989, the Polish centre-right has consistently defended and pursued the legacy of Balcerowicz's reforms.

This tenet is effectively the Polish centre-right's manifestation of the core European centre-right principle of economic liberalism.

History of the Polish centre-right

Box 5.2. Timeline of Polish centre-right governments

The timeline below illustrates when the centre-right in Poland has been in government.



By 'centre-right government,' we understand a centre-right party leading government. By 'centre-right elements,' we understand there being at least some centre-right ministers in the government.

The roots of the Polish centre-right, 1989-1993

We now discuss the early years of the Polish centre-right and the roots of its future challenges and characteristics. It was a period of centre-right political dominance, but Poland's political history in that period is a mess: Poland had seven different governments between

June 1989 and February 1996, of which the first five were centre-right. Unsurprisingly given the political context of the time, the prevailing mission of the Polish centre-right at the time was anti-communism.

BOX 5.3. Lech Wałęsa and *Solidarność*

Polish politics between 1989 and 1995 was dominated by the presence of one powerful figure: Lech Wałęsa.

In 1967, he began work as an electrician in the Gdańsk Shipyard⁴⁹¹ and, in 1980, became one of the founders of *Solidarność*. At the time, *Solidarność* was an anti-communist national labour union uniting professionals as varied as dockers, miners and farmers. *Solidarność*'s activity led to martial law being introduced in Poland and Wałęsa's arrest in 1981 – the same year he became the Time Person of the Year – which then led to regular clashes between workers and the ZOMO (*Zmotoryzowane Odwoły Milicji Obywatelskiej*⁴⁹²) paramilitary police, in which tens of workers died. A year later *Solidarność* was outlawed, but its activities continued illegally.⁴⁹³

Eventually, in 1989, the communist Government buckled and agreed to hold roundtable talks with the protestors. Those lasted from February till April.⁴⁹⁴ The Government agreed to re-legalise *Solidarność* and to allow for 161 (35%) of the seats in the *Sejm* to be contested freely, rather than just by the members of the ruling communist coalition in the June 1989 election. To the communists' dismay, of those 161 seats, every single one was won by KOS, the political organisation – in effect a political party – established by Wałęsa in late 1988 to be the political arm of *Solidarność*.⁴⁹⁵

491. Lech Wałęsa and Arkadiusz Rybicki, *The Struggle and the Triumph: An Autobiography* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1991), 95.

492. *Zmotoryzowane Odwoły Milicji Obywatelskiej: Motorised Reserves of the Citizens' Militia*.

493. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Lech Wałęsa", <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lech-Walesa> (2025).

494. Anita Prażmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 225.

495. Piotr Wróbel, "Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989–2004", in Mieczysław Biskupski, James Pula and Piotr Wróbel (eds.), *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 318.

After the election in June 1989, 65% of the seats in the *Sejm* were still controlled by PZPR, the communist party that has been in power in Poland since 1948, and its long-time coalition partners, the democratic socialist *Stronnictwo Demokratyczne*⁴⁹⁶ (SD) and the agrarian socialist *Zjednoczone Stronnictwo Ludowe*⁴⁹⁷ (ZSL), but its position was untenable. Of all the seats that were freely contested, PZPR won 0 in the *Sejm* and 1 of 100 in the *Senat*, the Polish upper parliamentary chamber. PZPR's coalition partners abandoned it in August of 1989 and, with their support, Wałęsa was able to appoint one of his *Solidarność* aides and fellow KOS member, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, as Prime Minister.⁴⁹⁸ As such, on the twenty-fourth of August 1989, Tadeusz Mazowiecki became the first non-communist Prime Minister of Poland since the Second World War. It was a resounding victory for anti-communism, but also an enabler for Balcerowicz's upcoming reforms and more overt religiosity in the Polish political space.

At that point in time, the Polish centre-right was the chief, but not only, participant in KOS, with KOS also uniting right-wing populists and nationalists.⁴⁹⁹ Mazowiecki's Government was, initially, incredibly popular. In late 1989, it boasted 90% of popular support in the polls.⁵⁰⁰ And although overcoming communism was the Polish centre-right's primary mission at the time, it was also committed to enforcing the economically liberalising reforms of Balcerowicz. Mazowiecki's Government in particular did not buckle to popular pressure that emerged following Balcerowicz's reforms and, although it was revolutionary in the sense of overthrowing the communist order, it also sought to compromise with elements of the previous communist ruling coalition to ensure a smooth system transition – in that sense,

496. *Stronnictwo Demokratyczne*: Democratic Party.

497. *Zjednoczone Stronnictwo Ludowe*: United People's Party. The word 'lud' can also be translated as 'folk' rather than 'people'.

498. Anita Prazmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 230.

499. Those are often referred to in Poland as *Endecja* – a colloquial term for national democracy, echoing the name of the right-wing nationalist party of one of the key figures of Poland's post-World War I independence, Roman Dmowski. It is sometimes contrasted with *chadeja*, meaning Christian democracy.

500. Piotr Wróbel, "Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989–2004", in Mieczysław Biskupski, James Pula and Piotr Wróbel (eds.), *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 319.

it remained a centrist government, as defined in Chapter Two of this report, at least as compared to some other elements of KOS that wanted to proceed in a more uncompromising fashion.

That willingness to compromise is also what ended it. Mazowiecki's centrist government wanted to prioritise re-introducing the rule of law and introducing a market economy over the prosecution of former communist leaders, removal of communist officials and the demolition of communist symbolism. As aforementioned, anti-communism was the Polish centre-right's most powerful driving force in those years, and although he was naturally opposed to communism, Mazowiecki acknowledged the former communist governments' willingness to compromise in the 1989 roundtable negotiations and saw them as legitimate participants in Polish political life in a free democracy (*gruba kreska*⁵⁰¹).⁵⁰² For example, he rejected calls to bar former communists from the civil service and from buying privatised state property, as well as to arrest or prosecute Gen Wojciech Jaruzelski, the communist Polish President widely deemed responsible for the deaths of multiple *Solidarność* activists between 1981 and 1989.⁵⁰³

In much of this, he faced opposition from his more anti-communist former ally, Wałęsa, in an incident often referred to as 'war at the top' (*wojna na górze*⁵⁰⁴). In late 1990, Jaruzelski resigned to pre-empt a petition for his resignation, which meant the oncoming commencement of the first free presidential elections in post-1989 Poland. In the bitter election which proved to be the Polish centre-right's first setback, Wałęsa ran against Mazowiecki, both still members of the disintegrating KOS. Initially, Mazowiecki was the more popular candidate. In a poll from April 1990, Mazowiecki was supported by 24% of respondents, as

501. Gruba kreska: Thick line. The phrase comes from a statement given by Mazowiecki where he advocates for separating from the communist past by a thick line.

502. Michał Jacuński, Barbara Brodzińska-Mirowska, Anna Paczeński and Maria Winclawska, *Party Organization and Communication in Poland* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 37.

503. <https://tvn24.pl/polska/tadeusz-mazowiecki-i-jego-gruba-linia-co-znaczyly-te-historyczne-slowa-ra970690-ls2309500>

504. *Wojna na górze*: War at the top. This phrase entered common usage when Wałęsa referred to his conflict with Mazowiecki with the words "*Potrzebna jest wojna na górze, by na dole był spokój*" – "A war at the top is needed so that there may be peace at the bottom."

compared to the 16% who supported Wałęsa.⁵⁰⁵

The election was lost at least partly because Wałęsa promised to get rid of the corrupt communist elites – with corruption a very legitimate concern in post-communist countries, but his approach nevertheless contrasted with the moderation of Mazowiecki. Wałęsa also criticised Balcerowicz's reforms – except for privatisation, which he saw as an opportunity to sell shares in Polish businesses to Polish citizens and democratise the economy.⁵⁰⁶ Indeed, anti-communism was clearly more important to the Polish centre-right than Balcerowicz's economically liberalising programme. Wałęsa also attacked Mazowiecki's intellectualism, contrasting his white-collar past with his own blue-collar pedigree – the derogatory term *wykształciuch*,⁵⁰⁷ indicating a person with high-level formal education and a patronising attitude towards those without it, became popularised at the time, and has remained a regular fixture of Polish politics since. Mazowiecki was moreover subject to antisemitic attacks. Although he was not Jewish, it was often believed otherwise and Mazowiecki played into the farce by publicising evidence of his Catholic baptism.⁵⁰⁸ Although it would be unfair to class Wałęsa in 1990 as merely a populist – Wałęsa was both a conservative and a non-cosmopolitan, and was deeply invested in building up stable Polish institutions post-communism – he was nevertheless the more populist candidate as compared to Mazowiecki.

The strength of anti-communist zeal that guided the Polish centre-right at the time is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that Wałęsa ultimately came first, winning 40% of the vote. Mazowiecki came third, winning only 18% and failing to even enter the second round, which Wałęsa won with 74% of the vote. Having lost the presidential election, Mazowiecki resigned as Prime Minister. Although the Polish centre-right was still in control, the unambiguously centre-right Mazowiecki's

505. Daria Nałęcz and Tomasz Nałęcz, *Czas przełomu. 1989–1990* (Warsaw: POLITYKA, 2019), 249.

506. Anita Prażmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 237.

507. Comes from the word *wykształcony*, meaning educated or, more literally, shaped.

508. Anita Prażmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 237.

loss to Wałęsa, who married the centre-right with elements of populism, demonstrated a shift away from centre-right dominance over the philosophy of Polish politics. Worth noting is that Wałęsa's campaign was supported by Jarosław Kaczyński, later the founder of PiS, who since May 1990 has been the leader of the Christian democrat PC, which he founded. In December 1990, Wałęsa made Kaczyński the Chief of the presidential Chancellery, which served to consolidate PC as a political force.⁵⁰⁹

Indeed, Wałęsa's anti-communism was so fervent that Wałęsa did not accept his presidential insignia from the outgoing Jaruzelski, who had not even been invited to Wałęsa's inauguration. Instead, the insignia were handed over to him by the last Polish President-in-Exile, Ryszard Kaczorowski – the Polish government from 1939 having continued until 1990 in exile, residing mostly in London.⁵¹⁰

While *wojna na górze* was ongoing, however, the Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister, Leszek Balcerowicz, was busy implementing his economically liberal economic reforms. Price controls were removed, state wage increases frozen, government subsidies reduced and central interest rates increased – from 56% in June 1989 to a peak of 432% in early 1990 – in a bid to balance the public books and reduce inflation.⁵¹¹ At the time, the Polish Ministry of Finance ran an annual deficit of 8% of Polish GDP and prices increased by 55% in the month of October 1989 alone, with inflation averaging well over 400% over the course of 1990. Government was also in significant debt to foreign lenders, numbering around \$50 billion, roughly two-thirds of the Polish GDP at the time.⁵¹² In June 1990, the first proposals for the privatisation of state industries were also introduced. In Balcerowicz's own words,

509. RG, "Dlaczego Jarosław Kaczyński musiał odejść z kancelarii Lecha Wałęsy?", <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/polityka/kaczynski-spotka-sie-walesa-w-sadzie/vwj98dd> (2017).

510. Piotr Wróbel, "Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989–2004", in Mieczysław Biskupski, James Pula and Piotr Wróbel (eds.), *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 325.

511. Anita Prazmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 231; Arkadiusz Drożdżel, "Stopy NBP miały poziom 432 procent. Zobacz ich historię", <https://www.money.pl/banki/raporty/artykul/stopy;nbp;miały;poziom;432;procent;zobacz;ich;historie;32,0,438560.html> (2009).

512. Piotr Wróbel, "Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989–2004", in Mieczysław Biskupski, James Pula and Piotr Wróbel (eds.), *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 320.

“[t]he short-term goal of the economic programme was to eliminate ... catastrophic imbalances and the resulting hyperinflation. The longer-term goal was to catch up with the West”.⁵¹³

The actions of Balcerowicz were to make Poland significantly richer in the coming decades, as explained above, but the initial effects were, for many, crushing. Farmers in particular reacted with a series of mass protests, starting in June 1990, blocking roads and rail tracks, demanding lower central interest rates and a restoration of farming subsidies.⁵¹⁴ Unemployment was rising rapidly, from 0.3% in January 1990 to 12% by December 1991. It only finally peaked in December 2003, at an eye-watering rate of 21%⁵¹⁵ – though much of this was caused by the breakdown of the trade relationship between Poland and what used to be the USSR,⁵¹⁶ which in turn was caused by trade liberalisation taking place in Russia, not in Poland.⁵¹⁷ Nevertheless, even after Mazowiecki lost the post of Prime Minister, centre-right governments were unwilling to compromise on pursuing the policies of Mazowiecki's former appointee.

The task of forming a new government following Mazowiecki's resignation was initially handed by Wałęsa to the fervently anti-communist Jan Olszewski, a *Solidarność* lawyer and a participant in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, but Olszewski refused due to disagreements with Wałęsa – Wałęsa's leadership did little to mend the fractions in the Polish centre-right, which contributed to its disunity. In consequence, in December 1990, Wałęsa appointed a new Prime Minister, the little-known 39-year-old economist Jan Bielecki, the leader of the liberal-conservative KLD (*Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny*) which he

513. Leszek Balcerowicz, “Poland: Economic Reforms Under Extraordinary and Normal Politics—An Insider's View”, in Paweł Churski and Tomasz Kaczmarek (eds.), *Three Decades of Polish Socio-Economic Transformations: Geographical Perspectives* (New York: Springer, 2022), 8.

514. Anita Prażmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 235.

515. Statistical Information Centre, “Registered unemployment”, <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/labour-market/registered-unemployment/unemployment-rate-1990-2024,3,1.html> (2024).

516. Antoni Dudek, *Od Mazowieckiego do Suchockiej: Pierwsze rządy wolnej Polski 1989-1993* (Kraków: Znak, 2019).

517. Indeed, Finland, which was not undergoing significant economic reform in the same period but which was very reliant on trade with the USSR suffered a significant economic downturn at the same time.

co-founded together with Donald Tusk, the future PO founder and President of the European Council. This represented a slight shift of emphasis towards liberalising economic reform, as was the priority of Balcerowicz, but Bielecki's Government, composed of five different centre-right parties – KLD, PC, *Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe* (ZChN), *Stronnictwo Demokratyczne* (SD) and UD – lasted only until December 1991 as a result of KLD winning only 7.5% of the popular vote in the October 1991 *Sejm* elections – the first parliamentary elections in Poland since the Second World War where every seat was freely contested.⁵¹⁸

Box 5.4. Bielecki's biggest achievement and the Polish centre-right's cosmopolitanism

In his time as Prime Minister, Bielecki had one major achievement: with some success, he asked western creditors to forgive Poland 80% of its foreign debt. In March 1991, western European governments agreed to forgive 50% of the debt.⁵¹⁹ The US followed with 70% and Brazil with 50% debt relief.⁵²⁰ This is worth comparing with the foreign policy that Poland will go on to adopt under PiS in majority government between 2018 and 2023; in April 2023, the PiS Government ratified a Bill which stated that Germany still owes reparations to Poland for the damage inflicted to Poland over the course of the Second World War and which continued the anti-cosmopolitan PiS policy of 'standing up' to Western Europe; in sharp contrast to asking for forgiveness from the foreign financial establishment under Bielecki.⁵²¹ As can be seen from the actions of Bielecki, the Polish centre-right has not always been uncompromisingly anti-cosmopolitan.

518. Piotr Wróbel, "Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989–2004", in Mieczysław Biskupski, James Pula and Piotr Wróbel (eds.), *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 326.

519. Balcerowicz regarded this to be the second most important achievement in the recent history of Polish economic policy after his own economic reform programme.

520. Piotr Wróbel, "Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989–2004", in Mieczysław Biskupski, James Pula and Piotr Wróbel (eds.), *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 326.

521. Marcin Antosiewicz, "PiS mówi Polakom, że walczy o reparacje wojenne, ale z Niemcami wcale o tym nie rozmawia", <https://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/polityka/pis-mowi-polakom-ze-walczy-o-reparacje-wojenne-ale-z-niemcami-wcale-o-tym-nie/s7t6cze> (2019).

The first non-centre-right government, 1993-1997

Balcerowicz's reforms were to remain high up on the Polish centre-right's priority list until 1993. In 1993, inflation was still high, averaging 37%,⁵²² and state employees, whose salaries were frozen, were suffering. The last in a series of centre-right governments between 1989 and 1993 was led by Hanna Suchocka of UD – Poland's first female Prime Minister – who was removed following a vote of no confidence after Suchocka refused to increase the salaries of state employees in an attempt to maintain the effects of Balcerowicz's reforms. She was unwilling to compromise on what she thought was necessary for the good of the country. In the words of Balcerowicz, "a [radical] strategy was to be preferred over a hopeless one".⁵²³

The removal of Suchocka – a consequence of the Polish centre-right's disunity and inability to maintain a stable coalition – marks the next milestone in the history of the Polish post-communist centre-right: the first non-centre-right government. In October 1993, Waldemar Pawlak, the leader of the agrarian PSL (an heir to ZSL), was asked to form a government, which he did in coalition with the left-wing SLD (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*),⁵²⁴ an heir to SD).⁵²⁵ The two parties, PSL and SLD, were strong enough to control 66% of the *Sejm*'s seats. UD, led by the former Prime Minister Mazowiecki, was left as the only political party representing the centre-right in the *Sejm*, having won only 11% of the popular vote. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the dissolution of the PZPR in 1990, the centre-left did not appear to be as much of a threat to Poland as it did in 1989 or 1990.

Primarily, however, it was the disunity of the centre-right that destroyed it. This was caused in 1993 largely by the lack of a central figure to reign in disagreeing factions. Wałęsa, the most significant

522. Macrotrends, "Poland Inflation 1971-2025", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/poland/inflation-rate-cpi> (2025).

523. Leszek Balcerowicz, "Poland: Economic Reforms Under Extraordinary and Normal Politics—An Insider's View", in Paweł Churski and Tomasz Kaczmarek (eds.), *Three Decades of Polish Socio-Economic Transformations: Geographical Perspectives* (New York: Springer, 2022), 9.

524. *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej: Democratic Left's Alliance*.

525. Piotr Wróbel, "Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989–2004", in Mieczysław Biskupski, James Pula and Piotr Wróbel (eds.), *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 331.

leader of both the centre-right and populists throughout this period, was a poor coalition builder. *Solidarność* was already plagued by internal strife in the eighties and was united only by anti-communism. With communists in retreat, the personal ambitions of *Solidarność*'s many members began to clash and Wałęsa did little to calm the situation. Rather, he frequently picked fights with figures on the centre-right; most notably Mazowiecki, but also the influential journalist Adam Michnik and multiple Prime Ministers, including Olszewski and Pawlak.⁵²⁶

Besides Wałęsa, the only other institution that had the authority that allowed for coalition-building in Poland was the Catholic Church. In the autumn of 1994, the Polish centre-right decided to begin discussions about uniting in an explicitly religious setting. The discussion group was known as the Convent of St Catharine, named so after the church of St Catharine in Warsaw where the discussions took place. Those were led by the priest and journalist Fr Józef Maj, involved at least ten different political parties on the Polish political right – including ZChN, KPN, *Partia Chrześcijańskich Demokratów*⁵²⁷ (PChD), Olszewski's *Ruch dla Rzeczypospolitej*⁵²⁸ (RdR) and several other minor parties. The parties managed to consolidate around four candidates but did not manage to reach further consensus, and Abp Glemp suggested that the Convent be dismissed.⁵²⁹ This is indeed what happened and serves as further evidence of the immense influence that the Catholic Church exerted on the Polish centre-right. Despite the collapse of the coalition talks, the Catholic Church explicitly warned voters not to vote for the centre-left SLD in the upcoming elections,⁵³⁰ but the Catholic Church nevertheless failed to unite the Polish centre-right.

With that said, even with Pawlak as the Prime Minister of a centre-left

526. Antoni Dudek, *Speech at the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYVMK8TQgr4>.

527. *Partia Chrześcijańskich Demokratów*: Christian Democrats' Party.

528. *Ruch dla Rzeczypospolitej*: Movement for the Polish Republic. Literally meaning 'a common thing,' the word *rzeczypospolita* does not have a direct English equivalent; it is often translated as 'republic,' but it also refers to the political system that was present in Poland in the years 1569 to 1795, generally considered Poland's Golden Age, when it is usually translated as 'commonwealth.'

529. Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2023* (Warsaw: Znak, 2023).

530. Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A concise history of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 417.

government, the disunited centre-right continued to wield significant influence. Pawlak was unable to roll back the economically liberal reforms of Balcerowicz and the Polish centre-right's anti-communism meant that it was Pawlak, rather than an SLD candidate, who was made Prime Minister, despite the socialist SLD being the larger party. This was done deliberately to avoid galvanising the powerful Polish centre-right, which perceived SLD as pro-communist.⁵³¹ Indeed, the return of the left into government positions meant that the Polish centre-right could effectively rally around anti-communism again; although religiosity was particularly important to the Polish centre-right around this time, as mentioned earlier, since 1993 anti-communism returned into pole position as the Polish centre-right's guiding principle.

This contributed to the re-selection of the anti-communist hero Wałęsa as the centre-right's candidate for the presidential election of 1995. Yet Wałęsa lost narrowly to the 41-year-old social democrat and former PZPR member Aleksander Kwaśniewski (48% vs 52%). While Wałęsa continued to be associated with a zeal to prosecute the abuses of communism, Kwaśniewski campaigned on a platform of modernisation; his electoral slogan was 'let us choose the future' and he hired Jacques Séguéla, the former campaign manager of the French socialist President François Mitterrand, to run his campaign. The people were tired of constant witch hunts and Wałęsa lost.⁵³² Although it remained its guiding principle, the Polish centre-right could no longer rely on anti-communism to carry them; they also had to build trust with the electorate by offering a front united behind a clear vision for improving Polish prosperity, such as that offered by Balcerowicz. Poland's economic transition away from communism has thus far been largely successful⁵³³ – GDP per capita, for example, has grown more than twofold in the last five years – but infighting on the centre-right failed to keep them in power throughout the mid-nineties.

531. Mieczysław Biskupski, *The History of Poland* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2019), 193.

532. Anita Prażmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 234.

533. Leszek Balcerowicz, *Socialism, capitalism, transformation* (Budapest: Central University Press, 1995).

Attempts at centre-right unity: AWS and UW, 1997-2001

It took until the parliamentary election of 1997 for the Polish centre-right to consolidate into two major parties. By then, UD merged with KLD to form the liberal-conservative-leaning UW (*Unia Wolności*, now led by Balcerowicz) which won 14% of the vote, while the Christian Democrat-leaning AWS (*Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność*, the name of which deliberately invoked the *Solidarność* of 1989) won 34% of the vote. Consequently, in October 1997, Jerzy Buzek of AWS became the Polish Prime Minister, leading a centre-right majority coalition together with UW.⁵³⁴

Of the three characteristics of the Polish centre-right, AWS was the more anti-communist party, while the Balcerowicz-led KLD was naturally a stronger supporter of Balcerowicz's economically liberal reforms. Since AWS was the larger party, anti-communism remained the Polish centre-right's foremost guiding principle throughout this period, but the presence of Balcerowicz as Finance Minister meant that his reforms remained a priority.

Buzek's coalition Government got off to a good start. By the end of 1999, Buzek's Government also managed to oversee wholesale reform to Polish education, healthcare, pensions and local government – the 'four reforms' – as well as to enter NATO. It also began preparations for Poland to enter the EU.⁵³⁵

On education, reform to which was authored by the AWS Minister of Education, Mirosław Handke, replaced the two-tier communist schooling system, which consisted of a compulsory eight-year primary school and an optional second level of schooling, which lasted between four and five years. The compulsory educational period was extended by one year and divided between two schools, the six-year primary school and the three-year *gimnazjum*. The *gimnazja* were generally large and built in towns to force children living in the countryside to

534. Buzek will go on to become President of the European Parliament in 2009.

535. Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2023* (Warsaw: Znak, 2023).

attend those better-equipped schools and better prepare them for more advanced education than a small countryside primary school could. More than that, education was made compulsory until the age of 18, though education following *gimnazjum* did not have to be realised on school grounds. The reforms were designed to reduce the proportion of pupils going to trade schools and increase the proportion of people attending university – indeed, today, 45% of Poles within the labour market have university education, up from 13% in 1989.⁵³⁶ End-of-school exams were made uniform and school funding was tied to the number of pupils attending a school. The educational reforms were a mixed bag – critique focuses on disciplinary problems in *gimnazja*, which concentrated children at the most developmentally difficult ages, and the class divisions which quickly occurred in *gimnazjum* classes between the children of parents living in urban and non-urban areas.⁵³⁷ *Gimnazja* were ultimately abolished in 2017, but other elements of Handke's reforms largely remain in Poland until this day.

On local government, a new tier of local government was introduced, expanding the system of local government from two tiers to three. Crucially, the largest of them, the voivodeship, was reduced in number from 49 voivodeships across Poland to only 16. The reform was met with popular approval and largely stands today, with only relatively minor boundary changes having taken place since.

On healthcare, Buzek moved away from financing healthcare entirely through taxation and moved towards a hybrid model, where healthcare is both financed directly through state expenditure and through a social insurance system, managed by 16 regional healthcare procurement organisations – *kasy chorych*.⁵³⁸ The reforms were criticised for how bureaucratic and untransparent they made the system of healthcare procurement, as a result of which *kasy chorych* were abolished in 2003

536. Marcin Piatkowski, *Europe's growth champion: Insights from the economic rise of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

537. Marta Zahorska, "Sukcesy i porażki reformy edukacji", *Przegląd Socjologiczny* (2009), 119-142.

538. *Kasy chorych*: Ill people's registers.

and replaced by *Narodowy Fundusz Zdrowia*⁵³⁹ (NFZ), which is financed both by taxes and mandatory health insurance.

On pensions, Buzek introduced private pension funds and linked pension payments more closely to contributions, as well as increased the pension age for some professions which could previously retire early. This made the pension system more sustainable in the long term, as the ratio of taxpayers to retirees in Poland continued to worsen, and provided a capital boost for the Polish economy, but with the consequence that pensions for those with lower lifetime earnings were made effectively lower.⁵⁴⁰ Despite being a source of frequent political controversy, the pension system created by Buzek's Government is largely in place until today, albeit with some modifications. Most notably, one of the two forms of pension fund in Poland – the publicly-controlled OFE, as opposed to the fully private IKE – is currently in the process of abolition, which was begun by the PiS Government in 2016.⁵⁴¹

In sum, the general direction of Buzek's reforms was centrist and economically liberalising. Although not all of them were met with unanimous approval, his Government managed to achieve sweeping, institutional reform in areas where the previous six governments failed to make equally significant progress. This was largely thanks to the fact that Buzek's Government, in its early years, represented a united, centre-right front.

Alas, by 2000, cracks began to emerge. As was the case in the past, the Polish centre-right began infighting, with elements of AWS refusing to work with the Government.⁵⁴² AWS was strongly linked to the trade unions which had formed *Solidarność* and its political direction was largely decided by them. In particular, the trade unions were generally

539. Narodowy Fundusz Zdrowia: National Health Fund.

540. Maciej Żukowski, "Reformowanie Systemu Emerytalnego W Polsce: 1989–2010", *Zeszyty Naukowe* (2011), 167–180.

541. Business Insider Polska, "IKE czy ZUS a likwidacja OFE — które rozwiązanie wybrać?", <https://businessinsider.com.pl/poradnik-finansowy/oszczedzanie/ike-czy-zus-co-bardziej-sie-oplaca/sftz8mz> (2024).

542. Leszek Balcerowicz, "Poland: Economic Reforms Under Extraordinary and Normal Politics—An Insider's View", in Paweł Churski and Tomasz Kaczmarek (eds.), *Three Decades of Polish Socio-Economic Transformations: Geographical Perspectives* (New York: Springer, 2022), 17.

more economically left-wing in their outlook than the Polish centre-right of the time, so Balcerowicz's reforms became a point of tension. Instead, the unions' main aim was to get rid of the leftovers of the communist system. As a result, not just economic liberalisation suffered; constructive policy in general was of secondary priority. Over the course of 1998 and 1999, AWS focused almost exclusively on exposing and shaming anybody who collaborated with the pre-1989 communist government – a process known as lustration. It did not help that AWS's leader and the de facto most influential man in government, Marian Krzaklewski, lacked the strength of character to get the unions to support the AWS policy programme; instead, the unions were becoming increasingly critical of Buzek's 'four reforms'.⁵⁴³

Box 5.5. Lustration

We do not mean to suggest that transitioning Polish institutions away from communism was not important. AWS was right to be afraid of subversive communist influence. Mazowiecki's Government, after having taken power in 1989, was too slow in stopping the communist *Służba Bezpieczeństwa*⁵⁴⁴ (SB) from shredding documents which outlined who was secretly working for the SB, laying ground for the *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita* project, outlined in Box 5.7 later in this Chapter.⁵⁴⁵ Moreover, communists were quick to capture much of the Polish court system; as communist judges were being replaced by the Ministry of Justice, local judges were permitted to nominate their voivodeship judges – broadly, the Polish equivalent of district judges. Local judges could nominate two judges in each voivodeship and the Minister of Justice would choose one of them to become the voivodeship judge. However, in many instances, local judges – who were judges in the first place usually on account of their allegiance to the former communist administration

543. Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2023* (Warsaw: Znak, 2023).

544. *Służba Bezpieczeństwa*: Security Service.

545. Antoni Dudek, *Speech at the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYVMK8TQgr4>.

– nominated two communist candidates, forcing the Minister to appoint a communist in a senior judicial position. As a result, in 1991, around half of Poland's voivodeship judges were former PZPR members.⁵⁴⁶

Antoni Macierewicz – then the Minister of the Interior – was tasked in 1991 with recovering the names of communist agents, which began the lustration process.⁵⁴⁷ The so-called *lista Macierewicza*,⁵⁴⁸ released in 1992, listed 64 Polish parliamentarians who were at some point collaborating with the SB, including the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, two ministers, six deputy ministers and one of the co-founders of PO, Olechowski. The evening when the *lista* was released became known as *noc teczek*⁵⁴⁹ and continues to feature as a key episode in Polish political history to subscribers of the *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita* political project – those subscribers generally see this as a missed opportunity to follow up on the revelations to completely uproot the remnants of communist collaboration within Polish politics and institutions. Accusations were then also levied against Lech Wałęsa, among others, whose case remains controversial.⁵⁵⁰

The failure of the post-communist Mazowiecki Government to purge Polish institutions of communist influence would prove to be a major headache for the Polish centre-right and a source of support for Polish populists in the years following Mazowiecki, hurting the centre-right in the process.

When AWS came into power, the lustration process accelerated. In November 1997, Buzek's Government fired around 350 Polish secret service agents who were identified as communist sympathisers, some of whom were trained for their roles by the KGB – the Soviet security agency – in Moscow. Despite the threat those agents posed to Polish

546. Ibid.

547. Macierewicz would go on to be one of Jarosław Kaczyński's top allies, serving as Defence Minister from 2015 until 2018.

548. *Lista Macierewicza*. Macierewicz's list. Antoni Macierewicz was the Polish Interior Minister between 1991 and 1992, the Chief of Polish counterintelligence between 2006 and 2007 and then the PiS Minister of Defence between 2015 and 2018.

549. *Noc teczek*: Night of the suitcases.

550. Polskie Radio, ""Noc teczek", czyli kulisy obalenia rządu Jana Olszewskiego", <https://reportaz.polskieradio.pl/artysta/617758,Noc-teczek-czyli-kulisy-obalenia-rzadu-Jana-Olszewskiego> (2025).

independence, SLD – now a home to many former politicians of the PZPR – and PSL (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*) – an heir to ZSL, a long-time coalition partner of PZPR – were highly critical of the firings, partly because the difference between communist sympathiser and an honest, albeit left-wing, participant in Polish democracy was often unclear. Many former communists were fine with participating in Polish democracy under the arm of SLD and had no intention to act as agents of the former communist regime or of Russia – indeed, in 2000, Poland expelled nine Russian diplomats on charges of espionage.⁵⁵¹ There was, however, no easy way for the AWS-led government – or indeed for later governments – to distinguish between the democratic left and undemocratic, pro-communist agents.

Furthermore, it is important to note that having been a communist collaborator was not mutually exclusive with having been an anti-communist – indeed, communist secret services were particularly motivated to turn anti-communists into collaborators. Collaborators could have seen collaboration as a lesser evil when faced with threats. Those who refused to collaborate were persecuted and often killed.

Evidence was also rarely unequivocal. Communist secret services were known to deliberately produce and leak counterfeit documentation designed to sully the names of anti-communist activists.

As a consequence of this, lustration quickly became unpopular among Polish voters. In 2006, 56% of the Polish public judged lustration negatively overall, while only 30% judged it positively.⁵⁵² When the lustration process began pointing fingers at people who were unequivocally anti-communist, such as Wałęsa, it is easy to understand why the public became sceptical of it. By overly focusing on anti-communism to the detriment of other policy areas throughout the nineties, even when it was also pursuing increasingly unpopular economically liberal reforms, the centre-right suffered.

551. Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2023* (Warsaw: Znak, 2023).

552. Bankier.pl, „Sondaż: Lustracja ma zły wpływ na polską politykę”, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Sondaz-Lustracja-ma-zly-wplyw-na-polska-polityke-1450717.html> (2006).

In 1999, farmer protests again crippled the country; farmers blocked the country's main roads in opposition to Balcerowicz's economically liberal removal of tariffs on agricultural imports and the Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek was slow in sending in the police to disperse the illegal blockades, perhaps because pursuing Balcerowicz's reforms was not his top personal priority. The situation was not too dissimilar to that which led to the removal of Suchocka – the Polish centre-right had to choose between Balcerowicz's economically liberal reforms and popular support.⁵⁵³

Balcerowicz finally resigned once it emerged that Buzek and Krzaklewski were using government powers to promote the private, party-political interests of AWS in local elections in Warsaw and UW left the coalition, leaving AWS to govern as a minority government.⁵⁵⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, economic growth subsequently declined, from an average of 4.8% between 1998 and 2000 to a mere 1.2% in 2001⁵⁵⁵ – though this was also caused by Russia's poor economic performance, which decreased Polish exports to Russia by around three quarters.⁵⁵⁶ A poor performance by AWS in the 2000 presidential election – Krzaklewski got just 16% of the vote, as compared to SLD's Kwaśniewski's 54% – was a sign of things to come. UW refused to endorse either Kwaśniewski or former coalition partner Krzaklewski in the presidential election,⁵⁵⁷ and, in the parliamentary election of 2001, AWS failed to reach the electoral threshold and was completely eliminated from the *Sejm*. The different centre-right parties were divided and defeated. The socialist SLD produced the strongest result by any political party in post-communist Poland until then, winning 47% of the seats in the *Sejm* only a year after their candidate, Kwaśniewski, won the presidential election.

553. Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2023* (Warsaw: Znak, 2023).

554. Ibid.

555. Macrotrends, "Poland GDP Growth Rate 1991-2025", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/pol/poland/gdp-growth-rate> (2025).

556. Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2023* (Warsaw: Znak, 2023).

557. Ibid.

Attempts at centre-right unity: PO and PiS, 2001-2006

There was a second serious attempt at overcoming disunity among the Polish centre-right in the noughties.

With the failure of the AWS-UW coalition government in the late nineties, both parties' reputation was irrevocably tarnished. Neither managed to get a seat in the *Sejm* in any future elections. Their voters were captured by two new political groupings, both of which will be more familiar to most contemporary readers: *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO) and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS). PO won 14% of the seats in the *Sejm* while PiS won 10%, and the two alone unequivocally represented the centre-right in the *Sejm* in 2001.

PiS was founded by the Kaczyński twins, Lech and Jarosław, as a Christian democrat party. Both the Kaczyński twins were influential anti-communist activists in the eighties. Lech Kaczyński subsequently served as Justice Minister in the Government of Jerzy Buzek – and was its most popular member among the public, advocating for a tougher approach towards crime – while Jarosław was a *Sejm* member for the Olszewski-led *Ruch Odbudowy Polski*⁵⁵⁸ (ROP).

PO, on the other hand, was founded by three politicians, all of whom were also anti-communists back in the eighties: Maciej Płażyński, formerly of the AWS; the independent Andrzej Olechowski; and Donald Tusk, formerly of UW. The centre-right that PiS and PO represented was therefore still firmly anti-communist and carried a lot of religious appeal; church attendance, in 2001, was positively correlated with voting for PO, uncorrelated with voting for PiS and negatively correlated with voting for the socialist party, SLD.⁵⁵⁹ Insofar as PO and PiS were most strongly united by their shared anti-communism and the two alone represented the Polish centre-right of the time, in that period, anti-communism was still the Polish centre-right's most important principle.

558. *Ruch Odbudowy Polski*: Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland.

559. Mirosława Grabowska, "Religiosity, the Catholic Church, and Politics in Poland", in Sabrina Ramet and Irena Borowik (eds.), *Religion, Politics, And Values In Poland: Continuity And Change Since 1989* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 269.

Box 5.6. How Polish political groupings emerge

Philosophically, the distinction between the new centre-right parties, PiS and PO, in 2001 was broadly reflective of the distinction between AWS and UW, with PiS being more conservative and less economically liberal and PO going in the opposite direction. It may seem bizarre that, following the utter collapse of AWS and UW in the wake of the 2001 election, the Polish centre-right reformed to create two parties of such similar philosophical character as the parties that only just failed. This, however, is exemplary of a regrettable feature of Polish politics: political groupings, rather than being determined by the shared political and philosophical beliefs of their members, are often – though not always – determined by the personal relationships of their leaders.

The failures of AWS and UW were blamed on the personal inadequacy of their leaders rather than on any policy or philosophical shortcomings. Indeed, personal relationships, rather than policy or philosophical disagreements, were also to blame for much of the difficulty the Polish centre-right faced maintaining coalitions between 1989 and 1995. The coalitions featured multiple parties with similar policy programmes which remained separate only because of the personal relationships and ambitions of their leaders.

For the rest of the twenty-first century, this tendency did not disappear from Polish politics. However, as PO and PiS manage to survive through multiple elections, the organisational continuity and party infrastructure that they can provide will become increasingly important to politicians with winning ambitions. As such, Polish politicians' tendency to group around personal relationships rather than shared political vision will manifest itself differently; when dissatisfied with their current political grouping – usually a coalition led by either PiS or PO – rather than leaving to found their own grouping, Polish politicians will often simply switch camp.

A good example of this is Roman Giertych. Giertych served as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education for the PiS-led coalition Government in 2006-2007, and he was at the time the president of

the populist conservative LPR (*Liga Polskich Rodzin*⁵⁶⁰) party. Following his personal falling out with the PiS leadership, he became an open supporter of the much more liberal PO. By 2013, Giertych claimed in an interview that he had been voting for PO “for years”,⁵⁶¹ later clarifying that he has been voting for PO since 2006.⁵⁶² Giertych is just one example of a very common phenomenon among Polish politicians, especially to the right of centre.

PiS and PO were broadly expected to work together to form another centre-right coalition. Indeed, in the local elections of 2002, this is precisely what they did; the two parties formed a joint electoral committee and worked together to put forward and support each others’ candidates. The result, however, was disappointing – so-called POPiS (*popis* is Polish for ‘show-off’) only managed to win 12% of the vote. Populist parties – the Christian socialist SRP (*Samoobrona Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*⁵⁶³) and LPR – came second and third, winning 16% and 14% of the vote respectively. Nevertheless, relations between PO and PiS remained very cordial, with the PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński later talking about a “feeling of a shared political culture that united [PiS] with PO” at the time.⁵⁶⁴ Both parties were anti-communist, explicitly worked with the Catholic Church – though priests often openly spoke in favour of PiS and LPR, despite church attendance correlating favourably with PO support⁵⁶⁵ – and were broadly supportive of Balcerowicz’s economically liberal reforms, though PO more so.

560. Liga Polskich Rodzin: Polish Families’ League.

561. Wprost, “Giertych: od lat głosuję na PO”, <https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/401438/giertych-od-lat-glosuje-na-po.html> (2013).

562. Gazeta Prawna, “Giertych: Na PO głosuję od 9 lat. Bielan: Był pan wtedy w naszym rządzie”, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/866779,giertych-na-po-glosuje-od-9-lat-bielan-byl-pan-wtedy-w-naszym-rzadzie.html> (2015).

563. *Samoobrona Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*: Self-Defence of the Polish Republic. Literally meaning ‘a common thing,’ the word *rzeczpospolita* does not have a direct English equivalent; it is often translated as ‘republic,’ but it also refers to the political system that was present in Poland in the years 1569 to 1795, generally considered Poland’s Golden Age, when it is usually translated as ‘commonwealth.’

564. Gazeta Wyborcza, “Słowa, w których Kaczyński widzi początek wojny PO – PiS”, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,9006336,slowa-w-ktorych-kaczynski-widzi-poczek-wojny-po-pis.html> (2011).

565. Mirosława Grabowska, “Religiosity, the Catholic Church, and Politics in Poland”, in Sabrina Ramet and Irena Borowik (eds.), *Religion, Politics, And Values In Poland: Continuity And Change Since 1989* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 269.

However, later in 2002, disaster struck SLD – one from which the party still has not recovered. In the so-called *Rywingate* affair, the film and TV producer Lew Rywin attempted to solicit a bribe from Agora, a large media company and the owner of Poland's largest newspaper (*Gazeta Wyborcza*⁵⁶⁶) – edited by the aforementioned Adam Michnik – in exchange for amendments to the SLD Government's Radio and Television Bill that would allow *Gazeta Wyborcza* to purchase Poland's largest TV station. A few months later, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published a recorded transcript of the conversation where Rywin attempts to solicit the bribe.⁵⁶⁷ Many deemed the SLD Prime Minister, Leszek Miller, to be implicated. SLD's reputation was ruined and their ratings in the polls skydived. By late 2002, their vote share went from 41% – achieved in the 2001 parliamentary election – to 25%, the latter achieved in the 2002 local elections. This again supercharged anti-communist feelings in Poland, with SLD's corruption perceived by some as symptomatic of a continued communist 'deep state,' where communist politicians and their allies rule the country on the basis of mutual agreements rather than democratic mandate.⁵⁶⁸

Rywingate therefore opened the way for the anti-communist Polish centre-right to get back into government. The Polish centre-right was on the ascendancy, but not by virtue of its own merit – except insofar as it called for a parliamentary investigation into *Rywingate* while in opposition. Consequently, in the 2005 presidential election, the final two candidates were Donald Tusk and Lech Kaczyński. The latter won, with 54% of the vote in the second round. Indeed, over 69% of voters chose a centre-right candidate in the first round. And although the populist showing in the 2005 parliamentary elections was strong – LRP and SRP won a fifth of the vote combined – it was again PiS that emerged on top, single-handedly winning 27% of the votes, with PO in second, having won 24%.

566. *Gazeta Wyborcza*: Electoral Gazette.

567. Anita Prażmowska, *Poland: A Modern History* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 251.

568. Dariusz Kalan, "How Poland's Ruling Populists Lost the Moral High Ground", <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/17/how-polands-ruling-populists-lost-the-moral-high-ground/> (2019).

At the time, it seemed like the Polish centre-right managed to overcome its challenges and secured power for years to come. PiS and PO were widely expected to govern together in a coalition. Indeed, according to a poll from October 2005, 74% of Poles wanted a PiS-PO coalition government. Nevertheless, after a protracted period of negotiations – which were moderated by Tadeusz Gocłowski, the Archbishop of Gdańsk, again demonstrating the Polish centre-right's continuing religiosity – lasting from the twenty-ninth of September until November 2005, no agreement was reached.⁵⁶⁹

The result was a minority government which forced PiS, in early 2006, to enter into coalition with both the left-wing populist SRP and the conservative populist LPR.

The Polish centre-right between 2006 and today

By the end of 2005, the year when SLD lost control of both the parliament and the presidential office, the brief period of left-wing dominance in post-1989 Polish political history came to an end. What replaced it approaches a two-party system: PiS and PO dominating Polish politics, an arrangement that largely continues until today. Although the two first emerged as centre-right parties, they have since forgone their centre-right credentials.

The Polish centre-right, from 2006 onwards, has again become dispersed among disparate political parties. However, unlike in the nineties, it is both unwilling and unable to unite into an explicitly centre-right governing coalition. Nevertheless, it can still be identified across all those different parties – the most important ones including PO, PiS and the parties explicated in Boxes 5.9 and 5.10 much below – by its continuing allegiance to the three tenets of the Polish centre-right: religiosity, anti-communism and adherence to the economically liberalising legacy of Balcerowicz. Politicians with different leanings –

569. Antoni Dudek, *Speech at the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYVMK8TQgr4>.

be they more or less religious, zealously anti-communist or economically liberal – joined different parties. In particular, until the 2010s, Polish centre-right politicians had no choice but to join either PiS or PO if they wanted to have a chance of ever effecting political change; those who subscribed to the anti-communist *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita* project, described in Box 5.7 below, generally joined PiS, while those who hoped that PO might continue the economically liberalising legacy of Balcerowicz – something PO's precursors, KLD, UW and UD strongly believed in – and that this is something desirable generally joined PO.

To understand why the Polish centre-right is still disunited today, it is crucial to understand PiS's motivation for their alliance with SPR and the LPR in early 2006 which was the catalyst for the two parties' fallout. Of these, there are three: policy disagreements around tackling corruption; strength of Kaczyński and Tusk's personalities; and poor party-political incentives.

First, the issue of corruption, which bore a lot of rhetorical continuity with anti-communism, particularly after the aforementioned corruption scandals involving the socialist SLD. PiS and PO were widely expected to introduce a new constitutional arrangement, founded in the concept of *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita*, to produce a clean break from the Third Polish Republic, which still harboured former – and suspected current – communists in senior political and judicial positions. *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita* was and continues to be the passion project of the leader of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, who, by 2006, assumed the more dominant role in his partnership with his twin brother.⁵⁷⁰ Over the course of the negotiations between PiS and PO, however, it emerged that the two parties had different visions for *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita*, represented by the different solutions to corruption presented by Kaczyński and Tusk in a debate between the two in 2007.

570. Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2023* (Warsaw: Znak, 2023).

Box 5.7. *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita*

Czwarta Rzeczpospolita as a concept was first formulated by the Polish historian and political scientist Rafał Matyja in 1998 – only nine years after the establishment of the Third Polish Republic in 1989.⁵⁷¹ Matyja was particularly interested in the question of how it is possible to be a conservative – and so be interested in preserving the order of things – in a country where the previous, communist order was profoundly anti-conservative. His suggestion was that there is no contradiction there, and that conservatives can be inspired by the example of the American Revolution, which Matyja saw as conservative.⁵⁷² *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita* quickly became a popular political slogan and, by 2005, the term was being explicitly used by all of PiS, PO and LPR.

The concept is crucial to understand the political project of PiS, and of Jarosław Kaczyński in particular; indeed, in recent years, the term has become almost synonymous with the political programme of PiS. The motivation behind the concept is that the Third Polish Republic did not produce a sufficiently clean break with the communist Polish People's Republic, sullyng its political character irreversibly, and so an altogether new Republic is needed, completely discontinuous in terms of institutions, law and personnel with the Third Polish Republic.

Some of the arguments in favour of *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita* are that institutional and legal continuity was maintained between the Third Polish Republic and the Polish People's Republic, therefore maintaining the privileges and embedded interests of the communist elites who were in charge during the Polish People's Republic, as well as the legacy thereof.⁵⁷³ According to Jarosław Kaczyński, those elites were in a continuing secret agreement with many elements of the post-communist ruling class and had to be weeded out.⁵⁷⁴ Some of those interests, the

571. Rafał Matyja, „Druga..., trzecia..., czwarta..., czyli o państwie Polaków”, <http://www.newsweek.pl/Europa/druga----trzecia----czwarta----czyli-o-panstwie-polakow,45898,1,1.html> (2009).

572. Tomasz Merta, „Nieodzowność konserwatyzmu”, <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/tomasz-merta-nieodzownosc-konserwatyzmu-2> (2022).

573. Wp.pl, „IV Rzeczpospolita”, <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,43834,wid,8118743,wiadomosc.html> (2005).

574. Agnieszka Kublik, „Układ” lekiem na całe zło”, <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114873,3744052.html> (2006).

thinking also goes, were captured or bought by oligarchs, partly as a result of insufficient lustration and partly as a result of Balcerowicz's privatisation programme. The crucial transformational period during which the Third Polish Republic was created was dominated by factional infighting instead of discussions about the abstract values upon which the Polish state should be rebuilt, as a result of which no such values were agreed and the evolution of the Polish state away from communism is directionless.⁵⁷⁵ Those values, proponents of *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita* think, should be grounded in conservative, Christian morality and those proponents often argue that Polish politicians' disrespect for the rule of law as well as Poland's low political trust is a result of Polish political elites' disrespect for the rules of this morality.⁵⁷⁶ What is more, because the Polish state was built on compromise between the former communist establishment and the infighting factions of post-communist Poland, it lacks effective tools to effect much-needed constitutional or social reform.⁵⁷⁷

The concept first materialised in policy terms in 2005, when PiS proposed a new constitution, but which was never ratified as a result of the PiS-PO coalition talks collapsing and PO refusing to support the new constitution. Although PiS did not ratify a new constitution once it came into power in 2015, the party's lax approach to the existing constitution was sometimes referred to by the media as constituting a *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita*.

As the threat of communism seems increasingly distant, anti-communism as a facet of the Polish centre-right has in recent years become largely reframed in *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita* terms, with anti-communism becoming synonymous with opposition to the shortcomings of the transformation from the Polish People's to the Third Polish Republic.

575. Władysław Frasyniuk, „Bitwa na numerki”, <http://polska.newsweek.pl/bitwa-na-numerki,18042,5,1.html> (2005).

576. *Rzeczpospolita*, „Koniec złudzeń”, <https://archiwum.rp.pl/artykul/419180.html> (2003).

577. Rafał Matyja, „Druga..., trzecia..., czwarta..., czyli o państwie Polaków”, <http://www.newsweek.pl/Europa/druga----trzecia----czwarta----czyli-o-panstwie-polakow,45898,1,1.html> (2009).

Donald Tusk's – Tusk was the leader of PO at the time, and is also today – solution was to deregulate and decentralise power, the argument being that nepotism and corruption among state officials is only possible when those state officials have power that they can levy. Kaczyński's suggested solution was to centralise power in Warsaw in trusted hands to take it away from corrupted and communist officials. Indeed, this is exactly what Kaczyński attempted after coming into power in 2015; local authorities' ability to raise money was curtailed in order to force them to work more closely with the government in Warsaw.⁵⁷⁸ Between 2018 and 2023 in particular, the proportion of local authorities Poland running an operational deficit increased from 2% to 57%.⁵⁷⁹ This is despite the fact that total government expenditure on local authorities increased by around 135%; while revenue streams were curtailed, local authorities were able to petition the government in Warsaw for money in exchange for political cooperation.⁵⁸⁰

Box 5.8. Corruption in Poland in 2005

As with AWS having valid reasons to be afraid of communist influence, Kaczyński was right to be afraid of corruption. One only needs to look at Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index from 2005 to see how big of a problem it was among post-communist countries in Eastern Europe. The best performer in all of Eastern Europe was Estonia, with a rating of 6.4 out of 10 – a higher rating indicating less corruption – and the average for Eastern Europe was 2.9. Poland scored 3.4.⁵⁸¹ The populist SPR and LPR largely agreed with PiS's policies on corruption, as opposed to PO, who insisted during the negotiation talks that they control the crucial Ministry of Justice themselves.⁵⁸²

578. Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2023* (Warsaw: Znak, 2023).

579. Sławomir Bukowski, „NIK potwierdza: rząd PiS skroił samorządy”, <https://wspolnota.org.pl/newsletter/nik-potwierdza-rzad-pis-skroil-samorzady> (2024).

580. Instytut Finansów Publicznych, „Tak rząd PiS wsparł swoje samorządy. Wielokrotnie większe dotacje”, <https://www.ifp.org.pl/tak-rzad-pis-wsparl-swoje-samorzady-wielokrotnie-wieksze-dotacje/> (2024).

581. Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index”, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2005> (2025).

582. Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2023* (Warsaw: Znak, 2023).

Second, the strength of personality of the persons involved. Both Jarosław Kaczyński and Donald Tusk are exceptionally ambitious people, with Kaczyński in particular a single-minded character, making him a poor coalition partner. It is not a coincidence that those two men continue to dominate Polish politics twenty years following their failed coalition talks. Indeed, Tusk may have reasonably expected Kaczyński to be forced to enter into an unstable and fractious coalition with the SRP and LRP which would then allow Tusk to come out on top in the following election.

Finally, the incentive for PiS and PO to agree to a coalition was, from a political perspective, poor. It would open the electorate up to an opposition which would capture those dissatisfied with the coalition government, of whom there would inevitably be some, forcing PiS and PO to reckon with a third major political party. However, positioning themselves as the Government and the Opposition, PiS and PO have thus far been able to maintain a stranglehold over Polish politics for 20 years; the coalition partners of PO and PiS over that period have all declined in the meantime.⁵⁸³

The motivation for the PiS-SRP-LRP coalition was to pursue corruption and embedded communist interests, but soon after it was formed in 2006, Prime Minister, Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, resigned, with Jarosław Kaczyński coming into power as his successor. A new corruption scandal implicating the SPR leader, Andrzej Lepper, meant that the coalition collapsed in November 2007, in turn causing Kaczyński to resign.

PiS gained little from their short-lived populist allies, and the fallout from PiS's time in government together with the populists made PiS a mortal enemy of PO. The brief PiS-SRP-LRP coalition was particularly anti-communist in its beliefs, but the left-wing SRP was openly hostile to Balcerowicz's reforms, primarily on the grounds that the privatisation of Polish industries would open the way for

583. Antoni Dudek, *Speech at the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYVMK8TQgr4>.

foreign investors to threaten Polish sovereignty and independence.⁵⁸⁴ Among the Government's most important policies were the creation of *Centralne Biuro Antykorupcyjne*⁵⁸⁵ (CBA), a government bureau dedicated exclusively to tackling corruption, dissolution of the military intelligence service under suspicions of communist infiltration and the introduction of so-called 24-hour courts, which require the defendant to stand for trial within 24 hours of a summons. As such, in this period, the Polish centre-right was particularly focused on anti-communism; but PiS's close relationship with the very religiously-motivated LPR also meant that it was a time when religiosity was disproportionately important to the Polish centre-right.

PO's leftward shift away from the centre-right, 2007-2014

By the late noughties, centre-right politicians lost control over one of Poland's two largest political parties: PO.

Following the resignation of Jarosław Kaczyński in 2007, PO came out on top, winning 42% of the vote, with PiS coming second at 32%. This meant that PO was able to form a coalition government with the agrarian PSL, which won 9% of the vote. This was to prove the most stable coalition in Polish post-communist history; PO would go on to govern with PSL in coalition until 2015. Notably, the populist LPR and SPR were decimated, earning only 1.3% and 1.5% of the vote respectively; around four fifths of their voters switched to PiS in an attempt to stop PO gaining power.

Both PiS and PO campaigned on a platform of anti-corruption – an issue strongly rhetorically related to anti-communism, as explained earlier – airing election ads where actors portraying rich, corrupted oligarchs expressed dissatisfaction with the party financing the ad. PO also promised an improvement in the standards of living, claiming that Poland could mirror the economic achievements of Ireland, while

584. Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A concise history of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 433.

585. *Centralne Biuro Antykorupcyjne*: Central Anti-Corruption Bureau.

PiS campaigned on the slogan “liberal Poland – solidary Poland,” deliberately echoing the language of *Solidarność* to contrast PO’s appeal among the liberal, urban middle class with *Solidarność*’s roots as a trade union movement. In that, different interpretations on how to follow up the legacy of Balcerowicz’s reforms became a dividing point for the Polish centre-right.

Despite Tusk’s electoral promises that, under PO, Poland would lean more into the legacy of Balcerowicz, PO moved away from being a liberal-conservative party. By 2013, Tusk was calling himself a social democrat.⁵⁸⁶ In 2007, Polish state expenditure amounted to 42.9% of GDP; by 2011, this became 44.4%, although it then declined to 41.7% by 2015 as a result of austerity measures, which included raising the minimum retirement age from 60 for women and 62 for men to 67 for both sexes. Tusk also significantly increased VAT in 2011 – the 3% rate was increased to 5%, while the 7% and 22% each increased by one percentage point – breaking an “oath” from 2007 to “remove from government any [minister] who proposes to increase taxes”.⁵⁸⁷ The disability levy and taxes on fuel, alcohol and tobacco were also increased, and tax exemptions for parents, car owners and internet users removed, while tax thresholds for Income Tax were frozen. Tusk furthermore introduced a number of new taxes, including taxes on copper, silver and banks. Consequently, under Tusk, the average tax rate in Poland became the highest in its post-1989 history.⁵⁸⁸

Worth noting, however, is that Tusk’s economic policy seemed to work. Polish GDP continued to grow under the government of Tusk, at an average rate of +3.5% between 2007 and 2014 and was the only European country – besides Albania and Belarus – that continued to experience positive growth in 2008 despite the ongoing global financial

586. Michał Olech, “Tusk nazwał się socjaldemokratą. Słusznie”, Wprost, <https://www.wprost.pl/415604/tusk-nazwal-sie-socjaldemokrata-sluszenie.html> (2013).

587. Sejm, “Wypowiedzi na posiedzeniach Sejmu”, https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm9.nsf/wypowiedz.xsp?posiedzenie=47&dzien=2&wyp=164&symbol=INFO_WYP (2022).

588. Krzysztof Kolany, “Druga strona medalu 7 lat rządów Tuska”, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Druga-strona-medalu-7-lat-rzadow-Tuska-7217929.html> (2014).

crisis.⁵⁸⁹ Moreover, PO remained the party of choice for many economic liberals who favoured it to the even more economically left-wing but socially conservative PiS. PiS began calling, for example, for a review of all major cases of privatisation of state enterprises since 1990.⁵⁹⁰ In that, the legacy of Balcerowicz, at least in the sense of it representing economic liberalism, seems to have been abandoned by both PiS and PO in the aftermath of their fallout. Religiosity and anti-communism became more important to both parties, though PO also abandoned the former of those over the course of the 2010s as it absorbed much of the vote of the left-wing anti-clerical *Ruch Palikota*,⁵⁹¹ which won 10% of the popular vote in the 2011 parliamentary election. Indeed, over the course of the later noughties and 2010s, Balcerowicz's reforms declined in importance as a principle of the Polish centre-right to only resurface in the 2020s, with radical economic liberalisation a key offering of *Nowa Nadzieja*.⁵⁹²

On foreign policy, Tusk was fairly cosmopolitan. He was vehemently pro-European, as one might expect of the future President of the European Council. Poland joined the Schengen zone in December 2007 and Tusk's Government began making preparations for Poland to adopt the Euro as a currency, but those were abandoned following the 2009 eurozone crisis. This furthered alienation with the more eurosceptic PiS, which by now made cautiousness about European liberalism one of its main selling points. This, however, never spilled over into scepticism about NATO: indeed, today NATO is one of Poland's most popular institutions, with 81% of Poles declaring they trust NATO.⁵⁹³

589. World Bank, "GDP" growth (annual %)", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG> (2025).

590. Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A concise history of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 427.

591. *Ruch Palikota*: Palikot's Movement. Palikot is the surname of *Ruch Palikota*'s leader, Janusz Palikot.

592. *Nowa Nadzieja*: A New Hope. This is the same name that is used by the Polish version of the 1977 space opera film.

593. Fundacja Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, "Zaufanie społeczne", https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_040_24.PDF (2024), 9.

PiS's populist shift away from the centre-right, 2007-2014

Around the same time, centre-right politicians also lost control over the other one of Poland's two largest political parties: PiS.

While PO was drifting leftwards, PiS embraced the role of an anti-establishment, anti-cosmopolitan, anti-liberal populist party. The gulf between the two parties widened and the Polish centre-right no longer had any party unequivocally representing it in Parliament, which also makes it difficult to identify what were the Polish centre-right's most important tenets around that time. Indeed, PiS's populist drift was supercharged in April 2010 when a tragedy struck Poland; President Lech Kaczyński, together with his wife, Kaczorowski and multiple top state officials, including the chiefs of the Polish military and the Governor of the Polish national bank, died in a plane crash near Smolensk. Kaczyński was flying to Katyń to commemorate the victims of the 1940 Katyń Massacre.

Notably, Kaczyński and Tusk both flew to Katyń, but on separate planes; state officials more closely aligned with PiS generally flew with Kaczyński, while officials more closely aligned with the PO flew with Tusk, illustrating the deepness of the divide between the two parties at the time – this is despite the fact that the two were in coalition talks only four years earlier.⁵⁹⁴

Lech's twin brother, Jarosław, was understandably devastated and he continues to suspect Russia as the orchestrator of the crash; Tusk adopted a more reconciliatory, cosmopolitan approach, with him and Vladimir Putin – then the Prime Minister of Russia – embracing at the memorial service which took place on the seventh of April 2010.⁵⁹⁵ Jarosław Kaczyński's dislike for Tusk intensified, as did his paranoia about foreign and communist interference. Given Jarosław Kaczyński's firm control over PiS as its party leader since the death of his twin

594. Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A concise history of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 436-437.

595. Karolina Słowik, "Drugi tom podręcznika do HIT Roszkowskiego. Jest Tusk z Putinem i Jan Paweł II jako leitmotiv", <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,30030301,drugi-tom-podrecznika-do-hit-rozkowskiego-jest-tusk-z-putinem.html> (2023).

brother, his personal beliefs have become the chief determinant of PiS's philosophy. Jarosław Kaczyński's paranoia led PiS away from the political centre and into populism, with Kaczyński seeking to destroy and remake Polish institutions in an effort to purge them of foreign agents, incompetent intelligentsia, communist allies and corrupt officials, described in more detail below.⁵⁹⁶ This anti-institutionalism would take PiS out of the definition of 'centre-right' as we have detailed it in Chapter Two.

The plane crash also meant that Lech Kaczyński did not get to stand for re-election as President. The 2010 presidential election was won by the PO candidate, the moderate conservative Bronisław Komorowski, who, as Speaker, was the acting President in the time between the death of Lech Kaczyński and the subsequent presidential election. Komorowski quickly appointed the 83-year-old Mazowiecki as his adviser, perhaps looking to present himself to the Polish centre-right as a continuity candidate despite PO's leftward shift.

With the zealously anti-communist PiS losing control of both the offices of President and Prime Minister and both PiS and PO abandoning the legacy of Balcerowicz's reforms, religiosity emerged as the key guiding principle for the Polish centre-right at the time. Komorowski invited the then-Pope, Benedict XVI, to visit Poland,⁵⁹⁷ and publicly commented on religious events.⁵⁹⁸ This was even as many key Polish Catholic leaders of the time – including Abp Józef Życiński and Abp Gocłowski – publicly endorsed Kaczyński in the election of 2010,⁵⁹⁹ demonstrating the ubiquity of religion in the public life of the Polish centre-right at the time.

596. Robert Kraskowski, *Klucz do Kaczyńskiego* (Warsaw: Czerwone i Czarne, 2024).

597. Gazeta Prawna, "Komorowski zaprosił papieża Benedykta XVI do Polski", <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/632306,komorowski-zaprosil-papieza-benedykta-xvi-do-polski.html> (2012).

598. Interia, "Komorowski: Wielki dzień dla Polski. Dobro zwyciężyło zło", <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/religia/news-komorowski-wielki-dzien-dla-polski-dobro-zwyciezilo-zlo,nId,881584> (2010).

599. Cezary Michalski, "Kościół przegrał wybory", <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/kosciol-przegral-wybory/grv6j4g> (2010).

Box 5.9. Centre-right exile, Jarosław Gowin

PO's shift leftwards eventually alienated the party's centre-right elements. This culminated in the PO leadership election of 2013, where the unambiguously centre-right conservative Jarosław Gowin challenged Tusk. Tusk won an overwhelming victory, getting 79% of the membership vote, and causing Gowin to leave PO and form the liberal conservative party *Polska Razem*. His conflict with Tusk motivated Gowin to ally with Kaczyński, and *Polska Razem* entered the same parliamentary club as PiS, allowing *Polska Razem* to have six parliamentarians in the *Sejm* following the 2015 elections.

However, cooperation with a coalition where power ultimately rested with Kaczyński proved unsustainable. In August 2021, Gowin and *Polska Razem* (which by then rebranded as *Porozumienie*) left the PiS-led coalition and Gowin was hospitalised for depression in November 2021 caused by loneliness and work-related stress – a testament to how difficult it is for politicians to be at conflict with Kaczyński. Gowin unfailingly stuck to his centre-right beliefs – his policy programme, when founding *Polska Razem*, focused on cracking down on bureaucracy, reducing unemployment and improving the fertility rate⁶⁰⁰ rather than pursuing *Czwarta Rzeczpospolita*, and Gowin consistently opposed Kaczynski's attempts at institutional capture or stirring up violence, such as when Kaczynski wanted to use the military to quell anti-government protests in 2020⁶⁰¹ – but this alienated him both from Tusk and Kaczyński and, consequently, cost him dearly.

600. Onet, "Polska Razem przedstawi program na wybory europejskie", <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/polska-razem-przedstawi-program-na-wybory-europejskie/ef556> (2014).

601. Magdalena Barszczak, "PiS rozważało użycie wojska podczas protestów Strajku Kobiet? "Potwierdzam, że tak było"", <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/polska/PiS-rozwazalo-uzycie-wojska-podczas-protestow-Strajku-Kobiet-Gowin-Potwierdzam-ze-tak-bylo> (2022).

The centre-right under PiS governments, 2015-2023

The centre-right did continue to influence Polish politics in the absence of unambiguously centre-right governments in the period from 2015 to 2023.

What finally put an end to the PO-PSL coalition was not PO's leftward shift, but rather the 2014 *afery podsłuchowa*⁶⁰² which played right into the hands of the anti-cosmopolitan PiS supporters. Most damningly, the PO Minister of the Interior, Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz, was recorded saying that the Polish state exists only in theory and commenting on government policy using a series of negative expletives. Radosław Sikorski, the Speaker, was also recorded using very explicit language to refer to the relationship between Poland and the US – a statement he later defended as truthful though crude.⁶⁰³ Nevertheless, the scandal hurt many voters' sense of national pride and reinforced perceptions of PO as the party of irreverent, cosmopolitan elites.

PO suffered significant losses in the parliamentary election of 2015 in the aftermath of the *afery* – they lost exactly a third of their *Sejm* seats and their popular vote declined from 39% to 24%. PiS benefitted; they won 51% of the *Sejm* and were able to form the first and only single-party majority government in the history of post-communist Poland. That same year, PiS also narrowly won the presidential election, with PiS's Andrzej Duda getting 52% of the vote to Komorowski's 48%.

PiS was still deeply anti-communist and religious;⁶⁰⁴ the latter evidenced, among others, by PiS's tacit endorsement of the 2016 coronation of Jesus Christ as the King of Poland at a large church ceremony attended by the PiS President Andrzej Duda and conducted on the 1050th anniversary of the baptism of Poland's first king;⁶⁰⁵ or by

602. *Afera podsłuchowa*: Bugging scandal.

603. Michał Kokot, "Sikorski: Miałem rację w sprawie "robienia łaski Amerykanom" przez PiS. Są szczęśliwi, choć zrujnowali relacje z Niemcami i Rosją", <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,24269929,sikorski-mialem-racje-w-sprawie-robienia-laski-amerykanom.html> (2018).

604. Konstanty Pilawa, "PiS zaprzecza własnym wartościom", <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2023/10/07/pis-zaprzecza-wlasnym-wartosciom/> (2023).

605. Wiktor Ferfecki, "Intronizacja Serca Jezusa ze wsparciem polityków", <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art9957021-intronizacja-serca-jezusa-ze-wsparciem-politykow> (2018).

their large level of subsidy towards the Catholic Church in Poland, to the tune of 16.5 billion zł (equivalent to around £6 billion in purchasing power parity terms) between 2021 and 2023 alone.⁶⁰⁶ Nevertheless, by 2015, PiS's transformation away from its Christian democratic foundations and towards becoming a right-wing populist party was complete. Its programme was largely determined by its powerful leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, who finally had the mandate to purge Poland of foreign and post-communist agents, to the chagrin of the "liberal elites" that Kaczyński despises.⁶⁰⁷ It has disavowed the economically liberalising reforms of Balcerowicz, mobilising around the claim that former communists and liberal elites conspired to deny working-class Poles the benefits of Poland's post-communist transformation.⁶⁰⁸

Religiosity in particular became important to the Polish centre-right following the 2015 PiS electoral victory; while anti-communism became more of a domain of populists, religiosity was still something the centre-right could uniquely lay claim to, as the PO-led opposition became increasingly anti-clerical and PiS's approach to the Catholic Church became increasingly instrumental. For example, unlike was the case in the early noughties, PiS attempted to present itself as the party of the Catholic Church despite Catholic leaders' insistence not to misrepresent the Catholic Church as favouring PiS. In 2020, in response to the anti-government protests, Jarosław Kaczyński gave a speech in which he called the protestors enemies of the Catholic Church and encouraged his supporters to go defend churches. In response to this, the Permanent Council of the Polish Episcopate responded with a statement opposing the "[politicisation and] instrumentalisation of the matters of Church and faith." Since the early noughties, the Catholic Church in Poland has become much more wary of picking sides in politics, but PiS refused to

606. Izabela Kacprzak, "Miliardy na Kościoły. Dotacje poza konkursem, nieweryfikowalni duchowni w ZUS", <https://www.rp.pl/kosciol/art42302841-miliardy-na-koscioly-dotacje-pozza-konkursem-nieweryfikowalni-duchowni-w-zus> (2025).

607. Joanna Fomina, "Of 'Patriots' and Citizens: Asymmetric Populist Polarization in Poland", in Thomas Carothers (ed.), *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 128.

608. Ibid.

respect that. The Polish centre-right at the time was generally committed to upholding Christian social teachings without appropriating the Catholic Church for political purposes or misleadingly representing itself as representative of the Church's will.⁶⁰⁹

The degree to which the legacy of Balcerowicz's reforms was abandoned was demonstrated by the fact that PiS went on to introduce sweeping left-wing economic reforms, including raising the minimum wage, lowering the minimum retirement age⁶¹⁰ and new welfare programmes to the cost of 240 billion zł (around £50 billion) between 2016 and 2022,⁶¹¹ intended to benefit those who lost out in the aftermath of Balcerowicz's reforms. PiS also conducted a programme of institutional capture, including taking over government administration, national media and courts for party-political purposes.⁶¹² Most notoriously, in January 2016, PiS passed an act allowing the Minister of Justice to intervene in the decisions made by public prosecutors and directly fire and appoint regional public prosecutors. Following this, the Minister of Justice, Zbigniew Ziobro, fired public prosecutors in over 90% of Polish public prosecutor offices and replaced them with PiS allies.⁶¹³ The Opposition criticised PiS's judicial reforms as non-constitutional – an opinion that was supported by the EU constitutional law advisory body, the Venice Commission. However, the Polish constitutional tribunal was by then filled by PiS-appointed judges who ruled in PiS's favour.⁶¹⁴ The rhetoric used to justify those actions bore a lot of continuity with the Polish centre-right's anti-communism of the nineties and noughties,

609. Konstanty Pilawa, "PiS zaprzecza własnym wartościom", <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2023/10/07/pis-zaprzecza-wlasnym-wartosciom/> (2023).

610. Krzysztof Jasiecki, "'Conservative modernization' and the rise of Law and Justice in Poland", in Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga (eds.), *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe* (Oxford: Routledge, 2019), 141.

611. Jakub Ceglarz, "Tyle pieniędzy poszło na programy socjalne PiS. To już pół budżetu", <https://businessinsider.com.pl/gospodarka/500-plus-300-plus-13-i-14-emerytura-tyle-wydalismy-na-programy-socjalne-pis/dqyr50m> (2022).

612. Robert Kraskowski, *Klucz do Kaczyńskiego* (Warsaw: Czerwone i Czarne, 2024).

613. Kultura Liberalna, "Historia zmian w sądach po 2015 roku", <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2021/11/30/kryzys-praworzadnosci-historia/> (2021).

614. Jan Kunert and Anna Kwaśny, "Gliński: za rządów PiS 'prawo nie było łamane'. Było. Przypominamy" <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polityka/top-10-przykladow-lamania-prawa-w-czasach-rzadow-zjednoczonej-prawicy-st7990421> (2024).

suggesting that, as anti-communism faded in importance as a centre-right principle, it became increasingly important for Polish populism.

It seems remarkable that, given how widespread they were prior to 2006, no major centre-right party remained in Poland by 2015 at the latest – and perhaps even earlier than that, given that PiS's transformation towards populism and PO's transformation towards the centre-left both began before 2015. By 2015, neither PO nor PiS advocated for continued economic liberalisation and no major Polish party had a respectful relationship with religion. Given the historical popularity of the centre-right in Poland, one would be justified to expect that a centre-right party should emerge, embracing the three tenets of the Polish centre-right, to the right of PO but eschewing the populism of PiS. And, indeed, attempts have been made. Before the 2015 election, *Polska Razem*, elaborated on in Box 5.9 above, entered an electoral alliance with PiS which allowed it to have some influence over the subsequent PiS Government, but, by 2021, *Polska Razem* was doomed to failure. Gowin's party's most notable policy concerned higher education reforms, intended to give universities more autonomy over how they spend their money, improve academic pay and introduce performance evaluation among academics,⁶¹⁵ and as such bore little relation to the pursuit of the Polish centre-right's core three tenets.⁶¹⁶

An attempt to fill *Polska Razem*'s role as the centre-right party was made by the *Polska 2050* party (PL2050); established in 2020 by Szymon Hołownia, a former Catholic campaigner and TV host of Poland's *Got Talent*, PL2050 ran on a programme of environmentalism and Christian liberalism. Their policies include investing all money gained through the EU Emissions Trading System on green infrastructure development; abolishing all taxes and levies on energy generated by roof-mounted solar panels and small, self-installed wind turbines; simplifying the tax

615. Gazeta Prawna, "5 najważniejszych założeń reformy Gowina" <https://serwis.gazetaprawna.pl/edukacja/artykuly/1202275,najwazniejsze-zalozenia-reformy-gowina.html> (2018).

616. Dawid Bunikowski, "W obronie Gowina" <https://www.rp.pl/opinie-polityczno-spoleczne/art754271-w-obronie-gowina> (2020).

system such that all taxes are paid through a single transaction; and reducing income tax in proportion to the number of children one has. They also promise not to raise income, business or value-added taxes until at least 2026, strengthen trade unions and workplace anti-bullying laws and end church subsidies.⁶¹⁷

Hołownia's Christian rhetoric and the party's economically liberalising policies make PL2050 more centre-right than either PiS or PO, but its emergence in 2020 means that anti-communism scarcely features among the party's tenets except insofar as it is implied by both religiosity and economic liberalism. Indeed, over the course of the 2020s, continuing the legacy of Balcerowicz's economically liberalising reforms regains in importance as a key Polish centre-right principle, with the emergence also of *Nowa Nadzieja* as an increasingly important political force, as described in Box 5.10 below.

Hołownia did reasonably well in the 2020 presidential election, winning 14% of the vote (the PiS candidate, Andrzej Duda, came first with 44%). The 2020 presidential election featured at least two centre-right candidates in the top five, including also Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz of PSL – more explicitly centre-right as compared to Hołownia, despite his party allegiance – who came fifth with 2.4% of the vote. However, in 2025, Hołownia suffered a humiliating defeat, winning only 5% of the vote, coming fourth.

617. Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni, "Polska 2050 program", <https://polska2050.pl/program/> (2025).

Box 5.10. Centre-right parties in Poland after 2015

Multiple political parties have attempted to capture Poland's centre-right electorate in the years since PO's leftward and PiS's populist shifts.

Explicitly centre-right parties:

PL2050: Its full name is Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni.⁶¹⁸ Established by Szymon Hołownia in 2020 to run his presidential campaign, and made into a full-fledged political party in 2021. Leaning to the left on social issues and economics in comparison to most centre-right parties, and marked by its strong environmentalism – its name reflects the party's ambition for Poland to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 – it was still firmly to the right of PO prior to 2023 and its leader, Hołownia, does not shy away from invoking God and Christianity in his statements,⁶¹⁹ true to the Polish centre-right's close relationship with religion.

Before the 2023 parliamentary election, PL2050 entered into an electoral pact with *Koalicja Polska*,⁶²⁰ described below, forming a political entity named *Trzecia Droga* (a name chosen to disavow the PO-PiS binary) split into two parliamentary clubs, *Polska 2050 – Trzecia Droga*, to which PL2050 belongs, and *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – Trzecia Droga*, to which *Koalicja Polska* belongs. *Trzecia Droga* managed to win 14% of the popular vote, coming third behind PiS and *Koalicja Obywatelska* (KO, a PO-led parliamentary club involving also three minor centre-left political parties). This allowed *Trzecia Droga* to join into a grand coalition with KO following the 2023 election, but with more autonomy than Gowin's ill-fated *Polska Razem*, given that they were not in the same parliamentary club as PO like how *Polska Razem* was with PiS. They manage to have some sway over the current Tusk-led Government, with Hołownia serving in the influential position of Speaker.

618. Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni: Szymon Hołownia's Poland 2050.

619. Klub Jagielloński, "Hołownia: Wiara w Boga w trzech Osobach to wzór myślenia o wspólnotcie", <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2021/05/07/holownia-wiara-w-boga-w-trzech-osobach-to-wzor-myslenia-o-wspolnotcie/> (2021).

620. Koalicja Polska: Coalition of Poland.

Given that PL2050 is not a successor party of KOS, it lacks the anti-communist fervour characteristic of many other Polish centre-right parties. That said, its economic liberalism is in continuity with the reforms of Balcerowicz and the party exhibits a religiosity typical of the Polish centre-right.

Koalicja Polska: Technically not a party, but rather a coalition consisting of PSL and multiple centre-parties, it was established in 2019 with the explicit aim of championing Christian democracy and consists of PSL as well as two minor parties: Centrum dla Polski,⁶²¹ another party consisting of former PO supporters who split in protest of the party's leftward shift; and Unia Europejskich Demokratów⁶²² (a name deliberately invoking the UD of the nineties). It also took in remnants of Gowin's Razem. It is the most explicitly centre-right of Poland's current political outfits; PSL explicitly shifted to the centre-right with the election of Janusz Piechociński as leader in 2012, who began a joint policy formulation programme with the remnants of Polska Jest Najważniejsza (PJN) – a Christian democrat party formed in 2011 by PiS rebels which was eventually in 2013 absorbed by Polska Razem. This project has been continued by Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, who was elected PSL leader in 2015, and continues in that role today.

Koalicja Polska's electoral pact with PL2050 allowed it enough influence in the current PO-led Government for *Koalicja Polska's* leader, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, to become the Minister for Defence in the current Government of Donald Tusk. In this role, he is overseeing a vast expansion of the Polish Army, including the training of 100,000 extra reservists by 2027⁶²³ and the negotiation of over 80 new military contracts worth around 350 million zł,⁶²⁴ but, by self-admission, his party has struggled to

621. Centrum dla Polski: Centre for Poland.

622. Unia Europejskich Demokratów: European Democrats' Union.

623. Bankier.pl, "W 2027 roku będziemy szkolić 100 tys. chętnych rocznie", <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Tusk-szykuje-armie-rezerwistow-W-2027-roku-bedziemy-szkolic-100-tys-chetnych-rocznie-8905583.html> (2025).

624. Jacek Świder, "Firmy w 'bojowej' gotowości. Szef MON wręczył kontrakty", <https://biznes.interia.pl/gospodarka/news-firmy-w-bojowej-gotowosci-szef-mon-wreczyl-kontrakty,nId,7960142> (2025).

exert an influence on the policy direction of the PO-led Government.⁶²⁵ At the time of writing, he is on a diplomatic mission to the US in an attempt to shore up American security guarantees towards Poland.⁶²⁶

The party clearly recognises the centre-right problem of disunity as described in Box 5.6 above: their campaign slogan in 2023 was 'Enough arguing, let us move forward!' It is also worth noting that the coalition boasts strong support from former politicians of the Polish centre-right of the nineties, including its informal leader for much of this period, Aleksander Hall. While *Koalicja Polska* is not focused on anti-communism – its largest constituent party, PSL, is a successor party to ZSL, which was in coalition with Polish communists for multiple decades, and therefore anti-communist rhetoric would likely be a poor political move on *Koalicja Polska's* part – it is in continuity with the reforms of Balcerowicz. For example, one of their suggestions is to sell off state-owned land parcels in the Polish countryside for 1 zł each to people under 35 for them to finance the building of a house on.⁶²⁷ If the Polish centre-right goes on to re-establish an independent presence in Polish politics, *Koalicja Polska* currently looks like the most likely vehicle for that.

Parties with centre-right elements:

Nowoczesna: Nowoczesna is a socially and economically liberal party formed in 2015. Of the tenets of the Polish centre-right, it only ever exhibited desire to continue the economically liberalising reforms of Balcerowicz – for example, its manifesto promises to privatise almost all state industries after many of them were nationalised by PiS between 2015 and 2023.⁶²⁸ It initially attracted some conservative politicians, including Zbigniew Gryglas; however, Gryglas left in 2017

625. Wnet.fm, "Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz: Mam nadzieję, że wyniki wyborów otworzą oczy naszym koalicjantom", <https://wnet.fm/2025/05/18/wladyslaw-kosiniak-kamysz-mam-nadzieje-ze-wyniki-wyborow-otworza-oczy-naszym-koalicjantom/> (2025).

626. Marek Świerczyński, "Mission impossible Kosiniaka-Kamysza? Szef MON w Pentagonie po gwarancje dla Polski", <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/2301731,1,mission-impossible-kosiniaka-kamysza-szef-mon-w-pentagonie-po-gwarancje-dla-polski.read> (2025).

627. Fatima Orlńska, "Program PSL na wybory 2023. Pracownicy mają mieć lepiej", <https://tvs.pl/informacje/wiecej-dla-seniorow-i-doplaty-do-mieszkan-obietnice-psl/> (2023).

628. Nowoczesna, "Program", <https://nowoczesna.org/program/> (2025).

to join Gowin's *Porozumienie* when it became apparent that *Nowoczesna* is not accommodating of conservatism. Since then, *Nowoczesna* has absorbed much of the electorate that used to vote for the anti-clerical Ruch Palikota, which won 10% of the popular vote in the 2011 parliamentary election and has itself become an anti-clerical party, for example promising to remove all references to Christian values from Polish legislation and removing religious studies from Polish schools.⁶²⁹ *Nowoczesna* joined KO in 2018 and therefore remains bound into the PO-led parliamentary club, allowing it only limited autonomy.

Nowa Nadzieja: Formed in 2015 by the veteran far-right libertarian politician Janusz Korwin-Mikke – Korwin-Mikke was an anti-communist activist in his youth and was the politician who introduced the lustration bill to the *Sejm* in 1992 – it was known by four separate names until 2022 when it was rebranded to *Nowa Nadzieja* soon before the expulsion of Korwin-Mikke from the party in 2023. Broadly as conservative as PiS, *Nowa Nadzieja* is also Poland's most economically right-wing party and her largest Eurosceptic party. It is the chief member of the *Konfederacja* parliamentary club. It exhibits all three characteristics of the Polish centre-right but is marred by its affair with populism and anti-semitism, though the party is trying to shed this reputation; one of its recent slogans is "time for experts in politics" and the expulsion of Korwin-Mikke was in response to an anti-semitic comment. The party also suffered a fracture in the run-up to the 2025 presidential election, with the overtly populist, anti-semitic and ultra-conservative Grzegorz Braun leaving to form *Konfederacja Korony Polskiej*⁶³⁰ (KKP) – Braun ended up winning 6.3% of the vote in the election.

On their website, *Nowa Nadzieja* self-describe as liberal conservatives. In particular, the party is strongly economically liberal, and its politicians have been praised for their economic views by Balcerowicz.⁶³¹ Although the party has no official policy manifesto at the moment, its "ideological

629. Ibid.

630. Konfederacja Korony Polskiej: Confederation of the Polish Crown.

631. Urszula Lesman, "Leszek Balcerowicz: Poglądy gospodarcze Sławomira Mentzena są mi bliskie", <https://www.rp.pl/gospodarka/art41556391-leszek-balcerowicz-poglady-gospodarcze-slawomira-mentzena-sa-mi-bliskie> (2024)

declaration” contains 12 points, of which eight are to do with either the respect for private property, low taxation, low levels of state interference in the economy or other tenets of economic liberalism.⁶³²

Nowa Nadzieja often attempts to eclipse PiS to the right on social issues and PO to the right on economics and its current leader, Sławomir Mentzen, did well in the Polish presidential election of 2025, winning 15% of the vote and coming third.

Kukiz’15: Formed in 2015 to be the political outfit of the popular rock musician Paweł Kukiz, Kukiz’15’s only achievement is helping its founder to win an impressive 21% of the popular vote in the presidential election of 2015. The party had a strong relationship with Polish trade unions, reminiscent of KOS and AWS, which meant that its rhetoric was strongly anti-communist. That said, the party has by now declined into irrelevance, largely as a result of having effectively no policy programme; its role was usually that of a protest party for those dissatisfied with the POPiS binary, which included some centre-right figures, such as the classical liberal former parliamentarian Jakub Kulesza. In 2024, the *Kukiz’15* parliamentary club rebranded as *Wolni Republikanie* which currently consists of four Sejm members with various right-of-centre party affiliations.

Conversely, rather than forming its own political outfits, since at least 2015 the Polish centre-right has been the most influential by infiltrating PiS and PO. The best example of this is Poland’s Prime Minister between 2017 and 2023, Mateusz Morawiecki. Less anti-cosmopolitan – but still very much non-cosmopolitan – and more centrist than his PiS colleagues, Morawiecki was appointed following a one-year tenure as Finance Minister explicitly in the attempt to improve relations with the EU following the 2015-2017 Eurosceptic Prime Minister Beata Szydło’s clashes with other EU leaders. This was despite Morawiecki’s lack of

632. *Nowa Nadzieja*, “Deklaracja ideowa”, <https://wolnosc.pl/deklaracja-ideowa/> (2025).

popularity among PiS party members.⁶³³

Whenever Morawiecki could exert control he would pursue centre-right policies and institutional reform. As Minister of Finance in 2017, Morawiecki designed the Strategy for Responsible Development, inspired by the work of the former World Bank Chief Economist Justin Yifu Lin, which was to reduce regional inequality between Poland's poorer eastern parts and its richer western voivodeships. It was also set to electrify Polish transport, including having a million electric cars on Polish roads by 2025 and to rebuild Poland's manufacturing capabilities. The Strategy was later implemented by the Ministry for Development, which, together with the Ministry of Finance, also prepared a comprehensive reform of Polish economic law, a Business Constitution designed to shore up business confidence in Poland⁶³⁴ – a catalogue of principles for running businesses, as well as rules confirming where the state is unable to interfere in the running of a business – and took steps to eliminate barriers to investment and simplify the tax system.⁶³⁵

Morawiecki also created in 2018 a new Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Technology, for which he appointed *Polska Razem*'s Jadwiga Emilewicz as Minister – indeed, Morawiecki often preferred to work with *Polska Razem* on economic and institutional reform than with his own party, having also appointed Gowin to be the Development Minister in 2020.

Morawiecki's non-cosmopolitan governments also invested significantly into the Polish countryside – 85% of the strategic investments under the Strategy for Responsible Development were

633. Paweł Musiałek, "Premier „białej prawicy”. Dziedzictwo i przyszłość Mateusza Morawieckiego", <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2023/12/10/premier-bialej-prawicy-dziedzictwo-i-przyszlosc-mateusza-morawieckiego/> (2023).

634. Krzysztof Jasiecki, "'Conservative modernization' and the rise of Law and Justice in Poland", in Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga (eds.), *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe* (Oxford: Routledge, 2019), 138.

635. Business Insider, "50 podatkowych uproszczeń Mateusza Morawieckiego. Mają dać 3,8 mld zł w 10 lat", <https://businessinsider.com.pl/firmy/podatki/50-podatkowych-uproszczen-mateusza-morawieckiego-maja-dac-38-mld-zl-w-10-lat/6v94vwb> (2017).

made outside of large cities⁶³⁶ – which led to PiS winning 63% of the vote in Polish rural districts in the 2020 presidential election. Together with Gowin, Morawiecki also opposed using the military to quell the anti-PiS protests of 2020.⁶³⁷ Economic and institutional reform always remained at the forefront of Morawiecki's personal priorities. In sum, Morawiecki had a pro-institutional, anti-populist influence on the PiS Government.

This led to some conflict between Morawiecki and the populist factions within the PiS government – in particular the Minister of Justice, Zbigniew Ziobro, whose populist party *Solidarna Polska*⁶³⁸ was in the same parliamentary club PiS, similarly to *Polska Razem*;⁶³⁹ and the Deputy Prime Minister Jacek Sasin – who treated Morawiecki with suspicion and carefully monitored his “liberal leanings.” For example, Ziobro, despite being a member of Morawiecki's cabinet, openly criticised Morawiecki in 2021 for maintaining Poland's commitment to the EU's green energy targets.⁶⁴⁰

Indeed, the most populist policy decisions under Morawiecki's Governments were not taken by him – Morawiecki was the Head of Government in name only, with power ultimately resting with Kaczyński. For example, the 2019 judicial reform act which forced members of the judiciary to declare what political parties and groupings they belong to, as well as forbidding them from protesting the government's judicial reforms, was the brainchild of Kaczyński and Ziobro. Morawiecki's deference to Kaczyński was very overt, going so far as to say in 2019 that Kaczyński would make a better Prime Minister than him.

Nevertheless, Morawiecki was not populist enough for Ziobro and

636. Krzysztof Jasiecki, ““Conservative modernization” and the rise of Law and Justice in Poland”, in Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga (eds.), *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe* (Oxford: Routledge, 2019), 139.

637. Magdalena Barszczak, “PiS rozważało użycie wojska podczas protestów Strajku Kobiet? “Potwierdzam, że tak było””, <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/polska/PiS-rozwazalo-uzycie-wojska-podczas-protestow-Strajku-Kobiet-Gowin-Potwierdzam-ze-tak-bylo> (2022).

638. *Solidarna Polska*: Solidary Poland.

639. Ziobro was also one of the parliamentary investigators charged with investigating *Rywingate* back in 2003.

640. Paweł Musiałek, “Premier „białej prawicy”. Dziedzictwo i przyszłość Mateusza Morawieckiego”, <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2023/12/10/premier-bialej-prawicy-dziedzictwo-i-przyszlosc-mateusza-morawieckiego/> (2023).

Sasin, both of whom tried to remove Morawiecki – Morawiecki relied on Kaczyński's protection to prevent this – despite his competence and popularity amongst the general public: in April 2023, Morawiecki was trusted by 40% of the Polish public as compared to 29% for Ziobro and 22% for Sasin.⁶⁴¹ As a result of his conflict with Sasin and Ziobro, Morawiecki was forced to fire his key allies and advisers, including the Chief of the Chancellery Michał Dworczyk, and replace them with people closer to Sasin.⁶⁴²

By 2019, Morawiecki began using increasingly populist language – for example, attacking Tusk as being pro-German and pro-Russian – and slowed his personal ambitions for institutional reform, likely in an attempt to appease the populist faction within PiS.⁶⁴³

Nevertheless, Morawiecki never stopped believing in the efficacy of more centrist governance. Whenever a crisis arose and Morawiecki had the chance to respond ad hoc, he attempted to circumvent the PiS-controlled institutions. This was the case with Poland's COVID response, the 2022 energy crisis and organising military aid for the War in Ukraine, for all of which Morawiecki responded by creating new, specialised institutions where he could appoint people not from within the PiS party structure. Yet Morawiecki failed to build his own support base, perhaps attempting to avoid what happened to Gowin, and so remained at the mercy of Kaczyński.⁶⁴⁴ As a result, with PiS failing to form a majority government in the aftermath of the parliamentary election in 2023, Morawiecki faded into opposition.

PiS came first for the third parliamentary election in a row in 2023, winning 35% of the popular vote. However, having alienated most of the Polish political establishment through their populist politics and attempts to take over control of Polish institutions for party-political

641. Fundacja Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, "Kwietniowy ranking zaufania do polityków i osób publicznych", https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_052_23.PDF (2023), 5.

642. Paweł Musiałek, "Premier „białej prawicy”. Dziedzictwo i przyszłość Mateusza Morawieckiego", <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2023/12/10/premier-bialej-prawicy-dziedzictwo-i-przyszlosc-mateusza-morawieckiego/> (2023).

643. Ibid.

644. Ibid.

purposes, they failed to form a coalition. Although they attempted to form a minority government in a blatant last-ditch effort to manufacture a constitutional crisis, Morawiecki lost a vote of no confidence and, in December 2023, Donald Tusk formed a majority government consisting of a grand coalition of KO (the parliamentary club led by PO, consisting also of *Nowoczesna*, the social democrat *Inicjatywa Polska*⁶⁴⁵ and the Greens; they won 31% of the popular vote), *Trzecia Droga* (14% of the popular vote) and the left-wing *Nowa Lewica* (a successor party to SLD, they won 9% of the popular vote).

PO's shift back towards the centre-right, 2023-2025

As it stands, Tusk's grand coalition, despite Tusk having campaigned on a centre-left platform, is proving surprisingly centre-right. *Trzecia Droga* controls 12 of the 38 ministries in Tusk's cabinet as well as the important position of Speaker – despite representing only a quarter of the coalition's voters – while Tusk himself has embraced increasingly right-leaning policy after his electoral victory.

In January 2025, he called for a tougher approach to tackling illegal immigration into Europe as well as for “an enormous deregulatory effort” to make Europe a more competitive economic environment than the USA.⁶⁴⁶ He also embraced a sort of pro-European non-cosmopolitanism: he ended a speech to the European Parliament with the words, “Our future is in our [European] hands. Not Chinese, not Russian, not American,” also saying earlier in the same speech that “Europe is and will continue to be great”.⁶⁴⁷

Despite having criticised PiS's approach to border control for being too draconian, calling illegal migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border “poor people looking for their place on Earth” and, as leader of PO,

645. Inicjatywa Polska: Polish Initiative.

646. Paulina Pacuła, “Tusk coraz mocniej jak Trump. Wzywa do wielkiej deregulacji gospodarczej UE”, <https://oko.press/donald-tusk-prezydencja-deregulacja-gospodarcza-ue> (2025).

647. Donald Tusk, Europe is not yet lost as long as we are alive – European Parliament, 22 January 2025, <https://polish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/the-speech-of-polish-prime-minister-at-the-european-parliament-europe-is-not-yet-lost-as-long-as-we-are-alive/>.

organising food parcel deliveries for refugees,⁶⁴⁸ in government at the moment Tusk had sharpened border controls, for example by extending the temporary suspension of the right to asylum in Poland and reducing the annual number of visas issued by the Polish Government,⁶⁴⁹ and reinforced the Polish military's presence at the Polish-Belarusian border, reflecting a non-cosmopolitan approach. Analogously to how, in 2007, Tusk ran on a centre-right platform but shifted left, in 2023, Tusk seems to have run on a centre-left platform but is governing to the right of what he promised. Indeed, in the presidential election of 2025, despite PO electing the historically very socially liberal Rafał Trzaskowski in an internal primary to stand for president, Trzaskowski also elected to portray himself as a much more right-leaning candidate;⁶⁵⁰ for example, emphasising the importance of the legacy of Pope John Paul II in Poland despite having earlier called for the removal of religious symbols from government buildings.⁶⁵¹ Nevertheless, he narrowly lost the election to the PiS-endorsed candidate, Karol Nawrocki, who won 51% of the vote in the second electoral round, largely thanks to *Nowa Nadzieja* supporters voting for Nawrocki instead of Trzaskowski.⁶⁵²

However, it is still too early to definitely judge the overall direction that Tusk will take his government in; and whether his legacy will be more as a centre-right or a centre-left Prime Minister.

Contemporary challenges

If the Polish centre-right is to be successful again, it must overcome three key challenges: abysmal political trust; disunity; and an extremely low fertility rate.

648. Weronika Walenciak, "Tusk: Nie robmy obrzydliwej propagandy wymierzonej w migrantów", <https://wyborcza.pl/7,82983,27468343,tusk-nie-robmy-obrzydliwej-propagandy-wymierzonej-w.html> (2021).

649. Gov.pl, "Granica z Białorusią i Rosją musi być szczelna na całej długości", <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/granica-z-bialorusia-i-rosja-musi-byc-szczelna-na-calaj-dlugosci> (2025).

650. Andrzej Stankiewicz, "Dziś mesjaszem antypisu jest Donald Tusk. "Kampania Trzaskowskiego go niepokoi", <https://www.newsweek.pl/opinie/to-beda-bardzo-brudne-prawicowe-wybory-mesjaszem-antypisu-pozostal-tusk/55w4gmw> (2025).

651. wPolityce.pl, "Kampanijny cud! Trzaskowski wspomina... Jana Pawła II", <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/725588-kampanijny-cud-trzaskowski-wspomina-jana-pawla-ii> (2025).

652. Bartek Staniszewski, "What Law and Justice's triumph means for Poland", <https://thespectator.com/topic/law-justice-karol-nawrocki-triumph-means-poland/> (2025).

Box 5.11. The threat of populism

Unlike as is the case with Western Europe, where the centre-right has enjoyed many decades of dominance only to be seriously threatened by populism in recent years, populism has long been a mainstay of Polish political history as shown by the presence of unambiguously populist parties in multiple Polish governments, including the SRP and LRP in 2006 or *Solidarna Polska* and indeed PiS itself between 2015 and 2023. As such, the centre-right in Poland is used to competing – and sometimes cooperating – with populist rivals. As is apparent from the history outlined above, populism was already a threat to the Polish centre-right when Mazowiecki faced off against Wałęsa in the presidential election of 1990 and has continued to be a threat since, with varying – but, importantly, not consistently growing – success.

The free elections of 1989 were made possible by a grassroots movement spearheaded by labour unions – *Solidarność* – the prevailing ambition of which was the abolition of the long-prevailing establishment and institutions – those of communism. This grand political upheaval could not be achieved by slow, reformist, piecemeal politics. Consequently, it has long been easy for populism, with the zeal and fervour that it provides, as well as all of its vices, to attract Polish voters.

Nevertheless, the main populist political force in Poland at the moment – PiS – has declined in popularity since their 2019 zenith. According to recent polling, their support declined from 43.6% at their peak to 26.3% today.⁶⁵³ And, although *Nowa Nadzieja*, which performed well in the first round of the 2025 presidential election and is discussed in more detail in Box 5.10 above, also has populist elements, it is not an unequivocally populist party and is indeed trying to shed its populist

653. TVN24, "Sondaż: tylko trzy partie w Sejmie, Konfederacja dogania PiS", <https://tvn24.pl/polska/sondaz-opinia24-poparcie-dla-partii-politycznych-marzec-2025-st8367750> (2025).

image.⁶⁵⁴ Consequently, Poland is a learning study on how the centre-right can challenge the populist right, but populism is not one of the major challenges faced by the Polish centre-right today, except insofar as it feeds into the problem of low political trust, explained below.

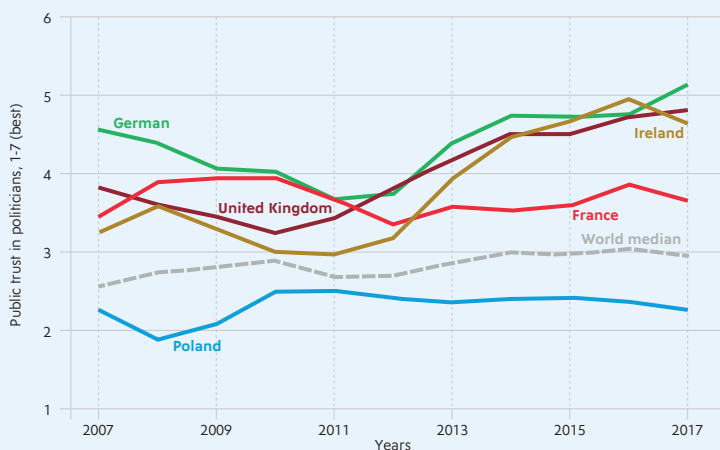
Political trust

While most countries have little trust in politicians – only 10% of the global public finds politicians trustworthy, according to a 2021 Ipsos study⁶⁵⁵ – Poland is an outlier, with some of the lowest levels of political trust in the world; an issue it shares with many of its Eastern European neighbours. According to another 2022 Ipsos study, Poland has the lowest social trust levels of any country in Europe – and some of the lowest in the world – with only 16% of Poles declaring that they can trust the majority of people. This is as compared to 33% of Germans and 43% of Brits.⁶⁵⁶ According to the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Index, Poland consistently ranks well below the global median for public trust in politicians, as can be seen in Chart 5.1 below.

654. Klub Jagielloński, "Jan Śpiewak: Konfederacja nie jest partią buntu. Sławomir Mentzen to czysty mainstream", <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2025/04/01/jan-spiewak-konfederacja-nie-jest-partia-buntu-slawomir-mentzen-to-czysty-mainstream/> (2025).

655. Niall McCarthy, "The World's Most Ethical and Trusted Professions" <https://www.eqs.com/compliance-blog/most-ethical-and-trusted-professions/> (2024).

656. Ipsos, "Zaufanie do ludzi w Polsce i na świecie", <https://www.ipsos.com/pl-pl/zaufanie-do-ludzi-w-polsce-i-na-swiecie> (2022).

Chart 5.1. Public trust in politicians in several European countries

Source: World Bank, "Public trust in politicians", <https://prosperitydata360.worldbank.org/en/indicator/WEF+GCIHH+EOSQ041> (2025).

As can be seen in Chart 5.1 above, public trust in politicians hit a low in Poland in 2008, soon after Tusk's victory with PO in the 2007 parliamentary elections, when it reached 1.88, with 7 indicating highest possible trust and 1 indicating lowest possible trust. At the same time, neighbouring Germany scored 4.4. Indeed, Tusk's first Government, which broke many of Tusk's electoral promises, is likely a major source of Poland's enduring low political trust. While Poles have always been fairly distrusting – according to the Polish Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS), Poland's social trust levels have not changed greatly since at least 2006 – Poles' distrust towards political parties has greatly declined between 2008 and 2010. In 2008, only 54% of Poles declared that they distrust political parties. This increased by 22 percentage points only two years later; the largest two-year shift in trust towards political parties since CBOS begun collecting data on this in 2002. This

has moderated slightly since, and, as of 2024, 62% of Poles declared that they distrust political parties.⁶⁵⁷

Poland's distaste for the political establishment is also reflected in Poles' unwillingness to give allegiance to any political party – indeed, a 2022 academic study finds that low political party membership is strongly correlated with poor political trust.⁶⁵⁸ Poland has, by far, the lowest proportion of its population within political party membership structures of any European country, despite Poland's multiple parliamentary parties. According to the most recent Europe-wide data on political party membership, only 0.6% of the Polish public belong to a political party. The second-worst country in Europe in this respect, Hungary, has almost twice the proportion of its public within political parties (1.1%).⁶⁵⁹ What is more, the Polish public's participation in political parties is decreasing – it was 1.8% in 2002, which was still the second-worst result in Europe at the time,⁶⁶⁰ and since 2006 has consistently remained the lowest in all of Europe.

Indeed, according to a 2024 survey which asked the Polish public regarding the respectability of 40 professions, the only two professions that the Polish public found less respectable than party activists are YouTuber and influencer, with only 14.4% of the Polish public willing to say that a political activist is a respectable profession.⁶⁶¹

As a consequence of Poles' low political trust, even if centre-right politicians advocate for good policies – which should be the aim of centre-right governments – voters will not believe that they will deliver on them. Low political trust incentivises electoral competition based on 'sloganism' rather than policy; consequently, in Poland, voting for a given party can often be commensurate with an endorsement of the

657. Fundacja Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, "Zaufanie społeczne" https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_040_24.PDF (2024), 9.

658. Emilie van Haute and Pedro Floriano Ribeiro, "Country or party? Variations in party membership around the globe", *European Political Science Review* (2022), 285.

659. European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure, "ESS1 – integrated file, edition 6.7", *Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research* (2023).

660. *Ibid.*

661. SW Research, "Aktualny ranking najbardziej poważanych zawodów (2025)", <https://swresearch.pl/ranking-zawodow> (2025).

values that the party symbolises rather than the party's policies. This is harmful to the centre-right which thrives on responsible governance and effective policy development but tends to eschew unrealistic and undeliverable political slogans. If nobody expects politicians to deliver on their promises, there is no electoral cost to making undeliverable promises. It also benefits populists, whose communication strategies often favour style over substance and who generally eschew intellectualism and policy-based electoral competition, perhaps explaining why populism has been a mainstay of Polish politics for so long, as elaborated on in Box 5.11 earlier.

Disunity

The centre-right was in many respects the heir to the enormously popular *Solidarność* and offered the obvious alternative to the communism of pre-1989 Poland. Consequently, it led the first five of Poland's post-1989 governments. Mazowiecki's centre-right 1989 government boasted 90% public support at one point. Yet, from the beginning, the Polish centre-right has been plagued by division.

This was the reason behind the Polish centre-right's first serious defeat – losing control of government after the 1993 parliamentary elections. The last of Poland's five centre-right governments between 1989 and 1993, led by Suchocka, was a vast coalition of seven different centre-right parties, including the amusingly named *Polska Partia Przyjaciół Piwa*.⁶⁶² Neither Wałęsa nor the Catholic Church – the only two figures who had the power and status necessary to bring together the different factions within the Polish centre-right – succeeded at doing so, instead often only facilitating division.

The Polish centre-right's proportion of the vote did not decrease significantly in 1993 – it was still more than 40% – but because of the centre-right's lack of coordination, many centre-right parties failed

⁶⁶² Polish Party of the Friends of Beer: The party itself is a study in the fractiousness of the Polish centre-right, as it soon divided into two rival factions.

to reach the newly-introduced 5% electoral threshold, the minimum percentage of votes that a party requires to gain a seat in the *Sejm*. For example, KLD got 4% of the vote, while Jarosław Kaczyński's Christian democrat party (*Porozumienie Centrum – Zjednoczenie Polskie*) got 4.5%. Therefore, while in 1991 the centre-right controlled at least more than half of the seats in the *Sejm*, that became only around 13% in 1993. Even the populists were more united; their two parties, KPN and BBWR (*Bezpartyjny Blok Wspierania Reform*⁶⁶³) both managed to pip the 5% threshold, receiving 5.8% and 5.4% of the vote respectively. Soon after, in the 1995 presidential election, the Polish centre-right's infighting also contributed to Wałęsa losing out to Kwaśniewski who portrayed a much clearer and unified vision for the future of the country; and then lost again in the 2000 presidential election having failed to get behind a single candidate, with the centre-right UD not endorsing AWS's Krzaklewski.

The Polish centre-right came the closest to unity between 1997 and 2005, when it was divided between just two large parties: AWS and UW between 1997 and 2001; and PiS and PO between 2001 and 2005. This means that, in particular since the failed coalition talks of 2005 which turned PiS and PO into long-time rivals, Polish centre-right politicians had been hindering and working against each other.

While an arrangement where two large centre-right parties take turns in government and opposition can work for the centre-right, as is the case with Ireland, as will be shown in Chapter Seven, this had not happened in Poland. Instead, it facilitated the two parties' turn away from the Polish centre-right, hence fragmenting it; initially between PiS and PO and later also between increasingly many parties, such as the constituent parties of *Trzecia Droga*, trying to lay claim to the inheritance of the Polish centre-right.

Rather than focusing on a centre-right policy programme, the Polish

663. Nonpartisan Bloc for the Support of Reforms. The acronym, BBWR, is the same as that which was used by the political organisation of Józef Piłsudski, Poland's national hero and dictator in the years 1928 to 1935.

centre-right has ended up working in concert with social democrats, as it had under the 2007-2015 PO-led government; populists, as it had under the 2015-2023 PiS-led government; and even left-wing socialists and liberals, as it does under the KO-led coalition government today which includes the left-wing *Nowa Lewica*, an heir to SLD.⁶⁶⁴ The effect of this has been a serious reduction in the centre-right's ability to determine Poland's public policy direction, examples of which are given in this Chapter and include PO's centre-right elements' inability to stop Tusk's tax hikes between 2007 and 2015 or PiS's centre-right elements' inability to stop PiS's judicial reforms.

Fertility

Poland registered under 19,000 births in November 2024, the worst month for the number of births in Polish history since the end of the Second World War.⁶⁶⁵ According to the Polish Economic Institute, by 2035 Poland is set to lose between 6% and 8% of its GDP due to a loss in workforce of 2.1 million – 13% of Poland's current workforce – in only 10 years.⁶⁶⁶ In the same timeframe, Poland's population is only set to decrease by 4%, meaning that the ratio of population to workers in Poland is set to worsen by around a tenth in only ten years. The Polish centre-right will be unable to promise their voters a positive vision of economic growth unless this problem is overcome. What is more, a decline in family life tantamount with a drastic decrease in fertility threatens the future of the Polish centre-right's religious voter base.⁶⁶⁷

Poor fertility is not a new problem in Poland. As aforementioned, the Polish fertility rate began declining in the mid-twentieth century and fell from 3 children over the course of a lifetime per woman in 1960 to

664. *Nowa Lewica: A New Left*.

665. Alia Shoaib, "Poland's Birth Rate at Lowest Since WW2", <https://www.newsweek.com/poland-birth-rate-lowest-since-world-war-two-2022741> (2025).

666. Sylwia Ziemacka, "Poland's Demographic Shift", <https://polandweekly.com/2024/11/25/polands-looming-demographic-crisis-a-shrinking-workforce-and-its-economic-impact/> (2024).

667. Bartek Staniszewski and Ryan Shorthouse, "The case for more kids", <https://thecritic.co.uk/the-case-for-more-kids/> (2025).

only 2.1 in 1989 and continued to decline, hitting a then all-time low of 1.22 in 2003.⁶⁶⁸

The problem is not helped by very high levels of emigration from Poland – not a unique problem for the Polish centre-right, but worth briefly mentioning here due to its effects on economic growth being very similar to those of low fertility. Emigration has been a problem since the end of the Second World War, with Poles often seeking to escape communist Poland, and the relaxing of border laws after 1989 – while Poland was still far less wealthy than any Western European country, meaning emigration was an attractive prospect for many – did not slow the process. Net migration from Poland averaged 30,000 a year between 1960 and 1988 and 20,000 a year between 1989 and 2021 – though Poland received a net inflow of almost a million people in 2022, when the war in Ukraine broke out. In total, between 1960 and 2021, the Polish population decreased by over 1.5 million people as a net result of migration,⁶⁶⁹ most of them working-age, contributing further to the demographic problem. The Polish diaspora consists of as many as five million people,⁶⁷⁰ 14% of the country's population. With that said, as the economic situation of Poland is improving – and that of Poles' target destinations is not – the number of Poles residing abroad has, since 2019, been decreasing.⁶⁷¹

The Polish Government has long been conscious of this problem – for example, in 1998, Buzek's Government legislated to institute the Demographic Reserve Fund. The most significant policy in this area, however, has been the Rodzina 500+ programme.

668. World Bank, "Fertility rate, total (births per woman)", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN> (2025).

669. Macrotrends, "Poland Net Migration (1960-2024)", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/poland/net-migration> (2025).

670. Weronika Strzyżyńska, "Record number of Poles abroad register to vote in election", *The Guardian*, 11 October 2023.

671. Statistics Poland, "Information on the size and directions of emigration for temporary stay from Poland between 2004-2020", <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/population/international-migration/information-on-the-size-and-directions-of-emigration-for-temporary-stay-from-poland-between-2004-2020,8,14.html> (2021); Eric Albert, "Thousands of Polish emigrants are returning after living in Western Europe", https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2024/05/31/thousands-of-polish-emigrants-return-home-after-living-in-western-europe_6673222_19.html (2024).

Set up in February 2016 explicitly with the intention of improving Poland's fertility rate, it started as a flat 500 zł (around £250 in 2016 purchasing power parity terms) monthly payment to families for every child they had above the number of one. Support, therefore, only came in once families had two or more children, with the exception that low-income families could also claim the payment for their first child. This was expanded to also include all first children in 2019 and, in 2023, the payment was increased from 500 to 800 zł. Between 2016 and 2023, however, the Polish price level increased by 46%, and therefore this only amounted to only a 9.6% increase in real terms since 2016.⁶⁷²

The immediate effect of 500+ was positive, but it quickly wore off. The Polish fertility rate was 1.32 in 2015. This increased to 1.48 by 2017, the largest two-year increase in the fertility rate in Poland since the eighties, but, by 2018, it was declining again, and quickly. In 2022, it was close to an all-time low, at only 1.22. According to non-UN figures, in 2024 Poland's fertility rate was only 1.12, the lowest in all Europe (ex aequo with Spain).⁶⁷³ What is more, the positive effect that the 500+ programme had come at an immense cost, estimated by the Polish think tank Institute for Structural Research to amount to approximately 1.5 million zł (around £300,000) for each extra child that would not have been born otherwise.⁶⁷⁴

Clearly, 500+ has failed. Any positive effect it has had on Poland's fertility rate has by now been overtaken by negative factors. A new initiative is needed; one that addresses the underlying causes of Poland's poor fertility.

This report will now move on to examine the philosophy, history and challenges faced by the centre-right in Germany.

672. Macrotrends, "Poland Inflation Rate (1971-2024)", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/pol/poland/inflation-rate-cpi> (2025).

673. Katarzyna Mokrzycka, "Europa znika na naszych oczach. Polska z najgorszym na kontynencie wynikiem urodzeń", <https://300gospodarka.pl/analizy/europa-znika-na-naszyc-oczach-polska-konczy-rok-z-najgorszym-w-europie-wynikiem-uroden> (2024).

674. Robert Kędzierski, "500 plus nie zwiększyło drastycznie dzietności, ale zmieniło strukturę społeczną rodzących", <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/500-plus-nie-zwiekszylo-drastycznie-dzietnosci-ale-zmienilo-strukture-spoleczna-rodzacych-7089028965034720a.html> (2024).

Chapter Six:

The centre-right in Germany

Having in the last Chapter focused on Poland, in this Chapter we will define the German centre-right, outline the key tenets of German centre-right philosophy, explain how those tenets have been applied and influenced in recent history the German centre-right's political fortunes. Finally, it will set out the current challenges facing the German centre-right.

What is the German centre-right?

The German centre-right, as represented primarily by the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), has dominated German politics since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1949. Like with the UK, this singular party and its sister, collectively known as the Union, is the primary representation of the centre-right tradition in the country consistently in post-war history. The CDU is active in all the German federal states except Bavaria. The CSU, on the other hand, is confined to Bavaria and is typically seen as more socially conservative than the CDU. While there are occasional tensions between the two, they unite behind a single Chancellor candidate at the *Bundestag* – the lower house of the German federal parliament – elections and form a single parliamentary group. While there is no formal procedure for

choosing the joint Chancellor candidate,⁶⁷⁵ on all but two occasions – Franz Strauss in 1980 and Edmund Stoiber 2002 – they have hailed from the CDU.⁶⁷⁶ Because it is by far the larger of the two Union parties, this Chapter will devote more attention to the CDU.

The Union parties, however, are not the only forces on the German centre-right. The liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) promotes economic as well as social liberalism⁶⁷⁷ and is traditionally seen as pro-business.⁶⁷⁸ There is some overlap between the FDP and CDU/CSU voters, and while it has also partnered with the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), the FDP has often been the preferred coalition partner for the Union.⁶⁷⁹ However, because it has always been a much smaller force, at its peak winning 14.6% of the vote at a *Bundestag* election⁶⁸⁰ and currently has no *Bundestag* seats at all,⁶⁸¹ the focus here will be on the Union parties rather than the FDP. Moreover, the FDP fails to exhibit more than one of the three characteristics of the European centre-right defined earlier in this report: while it is an economically liberal party, it is neither conservative nor non-cosmopolitan.

The Union's position as the dominant force on the centre-right was traditionally entrenched by the German electoral system. Under the German system electors vote both for a constituency representative, using the *Erststimme* or first vote and for parties on a state list using the *Zweitstimme*, or second vote. Seats are then allocated based on a party's share of the second vote. To enter the *Bundestag*, parties must

675. Sarah Elise Wiliarty, "The CDU/CSU and the 2021 Federal Election", in Ross Campbell and Louise K. Davidson-Schmick (eds.), *The 2021 German federal election* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 81-100, 83.

676. Guy Chazan, "Germany's CDU faces momentous choice on new leader after Merkel", *Financial Times*, 22 December 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/9acbb3ac-0d09-401b-a570-4add21f6a63e>.

677. David F. Patton, "The 'old five': The Bonn parties in the Berlin republic", in Klaus Larres, Holger Moroff and Ruth Wittlinger (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of German politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 216-33, 224.

678. Jefferson Chase and Rina Goldenberg, "What you need to know about the FDP", Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/what-you-need-to-know-about-germanys-liberals-the-free-democratic-party/a-38645446> (2021).

679. Thomas Saalfeld & Reimut Zohlnhöfer, "From 'Dream team' to 'marriage of convenience'? An introduction", *German Politics* (2014), 237-40, 237.

680. Sarah E. Wiliarty, "Germany: How the Christian Democrats manage to adapt to the silent counter-revolution", in Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Riding the populist wave: Europe's mainstream right in crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 141-69, 150.

681. The Federal Returning Officer, "Free Democratic Party", <https://bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2025/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> (2025).

either secure 5% of the second vote or win at least three constituency seats. This means that, even if a party wins a constituency, its successful candidate may not be able to take the seat if his or her party falls below the second vote threshold.⁶⁸² Because the second vote is the more consequential, all references to vote share in this Chapter refer to it, not the first vote, unless otherwise stated.

This has traditionally made it more difficult for minor parties to break through into the *Bundestag*. In the sixties, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD),⁶⁸³ and in the eighties the Republicans,⁶⁸⁴ for example, managed to win seats at the state level but never entered the *Bundestag*. As will be discussed, this has changed in recent years with the emergence of the populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), which first entered the *Bundestag* in 2017.⁶⁸⁵ However, as none of these parties would be considered ‘centre-right’ – according to the definition outlined by Chapter One of this report – said minor parties fall outside the scope of this Chapter, except insofar as they impact the Union.

While there was technically a CDU in the Soviet Zone and later East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, or GDR), this party enjoyed no real independence from the ruling communist party, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). Only in 1990, during East Germany’s one free parliamentary election, did the East German CDU compete freely as a truly separate party.⁶⁸⁶ As such, this Chapter will focus its attention only on the West German CDU pre-1990.

Finally, while recognising that Germany has a federal system, with significant powers in the hands of the 16 states, or *Länder*,⁶⁸⁷ this

682. Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, “Elections to the German Bundestag”, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/constitution/electoral-law/bundestag-elections/bundestag-elections.html> (2025).

683. Wiliarty, “How the Christian Democrats manage to adapt”, 141–2.

684. Frank Trentmann, *Out of the darkness: The Germans 1942–2022* (London: Penguin, 2024), 574.

685. Léonie de Jonge and Rolf Frankenberger, “What is the AfD? Germany’s far-right party, explained”, Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/what-is-the-afd-germanys-far-right-party-explained-250218> (2025).

686. German Bundestag, “The freely elected People’s Chamber”, https://www.bundestag.de/en/parliament/history/parliamentarism/peoples_chamber/peoples_chamber-201526 (2025). For the East German CDU, see Dieter Segert “The East German CDU: An historical or a post-community party?”, *Party Politics* (1995), 589–98.

687. For a discussion of the role of the *Länder*, see Arthur Benz, “The federal system and the *Länder*”, in Klaus Larres, Holger Moroff and Ruth Wittlinger (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of German politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 179–95.

Chapter will focus on developments at the national level, except where *Länder* politics is particularly relevant.

Tenets of the German centre-right

The German centre-right has several key tenets: pragmatism; western internationalism; non-denominational Christianity; social conservatism; and the social market economy. The last three of these together are particularly representative of the dominant political philosophy of the German centre-right: Christian democracy. The importance of each of these principles has varied over time and individual members of the German centre-right may not necessarily subscribe to all of them or interpret them in the same way. However, in the long run this combination has proven highly effective, appealing to a combination of socially conservative farmers, businessmen wary of overly redistributive economic policies and urban workers, and has led it to the CDU being described as a *Volkspartei* or ‘catch-all’ party.⁶⁸⁸ Each of these tenets, and their relationships with the principles of the European centre-right detailed in Chapter Two, will now be outlined in turn.

Pragmatism

The CDU is typically seen as pragmatic rather than ideological,⁶⁸⁹ and this flexibility has remained a key element of its success.⁶⁹⁰ Part of this is driven by the German electoral system which makes it difficult for rigidly ideological parties to secure majority support.⁶⁹¹ Although the 5% threshold traditionally limited the ability of smaller parties to enter the *Bundestag*, the proportional nature of the German system also makes it extremely difficult for any one party to dominate the system. This necessitates the formation of coalition governments and

688. Ed Turner, Simon Green & William Paterson “Introduction: Understanding the Transformation of the CDU”, *German Politics* (2013), 1-15, 2

689. Wiliarty, “How the Christian Democrats manage to adapt”, 150.

690. *Ibid.*, 142.

691. Dominik Geppert, “The Crisis of the Welfare State: Thatcherism as a Model for German Christian Democracy?”, in Arnd Bauerkämper, Christiane Eisenberg (eds.), *Britain as a Model of Modern Society? German Views* (Augsburg: Wißner, 2006), 168-83, 169-70.

compromises on matters of policy. Indeed, only once has any party won an outright majority at a *Bundestag* election: the Union in 1957.⁶⁹² The appetite for consensus within German politics is well-illustrated by the fact that the Union then still chose to govern in coalition with the German Party (DP) until nine of the latter's parliamentarians defected to the CDU in 1960.⁶⁹³

This pragmatism is not entirely driven by political convenience, however. Like conservatives in the Anglosphere, Christian democrats are both sceptical of overarching theories⁶⁹⁴ and hostile to utopianism.⁶⁹⁵ Moreover, such utopianism was blamed for Germany's disastrous slide into Nazism and war.⁶⁹⁶ To prevent any repeat of this, Christian democrats believe that, while reforms are necessary to preserve, they should be implemented pragmatically and cautiously.⁶⁹⁷ As such, the German centre-right's pragmatism aligns with one of the three European centre-right principles outlined in Chapter Two: conservatism.

Western internationalism

German Christian democracy has traditionally been characterised by a firm support for West German participation in the western alliance structure and western institutions more generally. This meant entrenching West Germany in both the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Economic Community (EEC), which in 1992 became the European Union (EU), before reunifying with East Germany. By helping to rehabilitate Germany's image abroad after the Nazi era, this was seen as a way of helping to maximise German

692. The Federal Returning Officer, "21st Bundestag election", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/> (2025).

693. German Bundestag, "Stabilität und Teilung (1957 bis 1961)", <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/wahlperioden-03-199868> (2025).

694. Ulrich Lappenküper, "Between Concentration Movement and People's Party: The Christian Democratic Union in Germany", in Michael Gehler and Wolfram Kaiser (eds.), *Christian Democracy in Europe since 1945* (London; New York, Routledge, 2004), 21–32, 22.

695. Martina Steber, "A Better Tomorrow. Making Sense of Time in the Conservative Party and the CDU/CSU in the 1960s and 1970", *Journal of Modern European History* (2015), 317–37, 320.

696. Martina Steber, *Guardians of concepts: Political languages of conservatism in Britain and West Germany, 1945–1980*, trans. David Dichelle (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2023), 428.

697. *Ibid.*, 274.

influence abroad.⁶⁹⁸ As will be discussed later in this Chapter, this did not mean that Christian Democrats opposed German reunification, to which they remained firmly committed, but rather that reunification could not come at the expense of the reunified Germany's NATO and EU commitments.

Germany's unique history meant that the centre-right pursued a more internationalist rather than a nationalist approach, making it less non-cosmopolitan than the centre-right in other European countries.

Box 6.1. The division of Germany, 1949-90

Following the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945, the country was divided into four zones of occupation: the British, French, American and Soviet. Berlin, the former capital, was itself divided into four sectors despite being completely surrounded by the Soviet occupation zone. In 1949, the three western zones combined to form the FRG, commonly referred to as West Germany, with its capital at Bonn. That same year, the Soviet zone was transformed into the communist GDR, commonly known as East Germany.⁶⁹⁹ The two states remained separate until 1990, following the GDR's collapse and the absorption of its territory into the FRG.

Between 1949 and 1990, West Berlin, comprising the British, American and French sectors of the city, though autonomous, remained formally outside the FRG and under Allied occupation. However, there were close economic and political links between the two, and federal laws were applied throughout the city.⁷⁰⁰

698. Ronald J. Granieri, *The ambivalent alliance: Konrad Adenauer, the CDU/CSU and the West, 1949-1966* (New York: Berghahn, 2003), 230.

699. For a recent account of the GDR, see Katja Hoyer, *Beyond the wall: East Germany, 1949-1990* (London: Allen Lane, 2023).

700. Central Intelligence Agency, "West Berlin's legal ties with Bonn", https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000397631.pdf (1960).

Non-denominational Christianity

As its name implies, Christianity is a core element of the CDU/CSU Union's identity. Crucially, this is a non-denominational Christianity that is independent of any churches. Although Catholics, including Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, were more prominent than Protestants in the CDU's early years⁷⁰¹ and continue to dominate the CSU. Catholic social thought, specifically around the importance of social cohesion between workers, families and employers⁷⁰² heavily influenced the Union's approach to the social market economy.⁷⁰³

As will be expanded on in the history section, this flexible,⁷⁰⁴ non-denominational Christianity served a key pragmatic function by providing a unifying force to protect conservative social values against communism and the SPD.⁷⁰⁵ Crucially, it also provided the new party with a link to a pre-existing centre-right political tradition untainted by association with Nazism.⁷⁰⁶ The perceived shared sense of shared Christian suffering under National Socialism, and of the imperative re-Christianising Germany as an antidote to the secularism and materialism that they blamed for its rise, created further common ground between centre-right inclined West Germans.⁷⁰⁷ While not completely eradicating inter-denominational differences, it did enough to help sustain the Union in the early postwar decades.⁷⁰⁸

Although its importance as a unifying theme had weakened since the late sixties, and German society has become increasingly secular in recent decades,⁷⁰⁹ German Christian democrats continued to enjoy disproportionate support among churchgoing voters well into

701. Lappenküper, "Between concentration movement and people's party", 22.

702. Bryan Fanning, *Three roads to the welfare state: Liberalism, social democracy and Christian democracy* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2021) 197.

703. Geppert, "Crisis of the welfare state", 169.

704. Martina Steber, "Christianity and party ideology: German Christian Democracy, British Conservatism and the problem of religion between the 1950s and 1980s" (draft chapter, 2025), 37. The author is very grateful to Dr Steber for sharing an advanced proof of this Chapter.

705. Maria D. Mitchell, *The origins of Christian democracy* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2012), 4-5.

706. Steber, "Christianity and party ideology", 35.

707. Fanning, *Three roads to the welfare state*, 193.

708. Mitchell, *Origins of Christian democracy*, 6-7.

709. Turner, Green and Paterson, "Introduction: Understanding the Transformation of the CDU", 4.

the twenty-first century.⁷¹⁰ As well as reflecting its pragmatism, that Christian democracy was built upon a key bastion of pre-war society, Christianity, means that, among others in this respect, the German centre-right manifests one of the three principles of the European centre-right discussed earlier in this report: conservatism.

Social conservatism

While hesitant to describe themselves as such, social conservatism is another key element of the Union's philosophy. Especially in the earlier post-war years, the Union parties consciously avoided labelling themselves as 'conservative.' Tarnished by Weimar Republic-era conservative parties' hostility to liberalism and their role in facilitating the rise of Hitler, conservatism was seen as an obstacle to re-establishing German democracy.⁷¹¹

Despite this, recognisably socially conservative ideas are critical to Christian democrat thought. To Christian democrats, the traditional family is at the centre of society and, as such, must be supported with assistance to those raising children.⁷¹² The socially conservative influence also meant that Christian democrats were traditionally opposed, for example, to liberalising German abortion laws.

This social conservatism also translated into the German centre right's attitudes towards immigration and citizenship. Long holding that citizenship should be based on ethnicity, Christian democrats have traditionally favoured limiting immigration⁷¹³ and have been reluctant to reform citizenship laws to facilitate the naturalisation of those who entered Germany.

More recently, as will be seen, Christian democracy has shifted away from some socially conservative values, as Chancellor Angela Merkel's relatively permissive approach to asylum seekers from the mid 2010s

710. Wiliarty, "How the Christian Democrats manage to adapt", 143.

711. Martina Steber, *Guardians of concepts*, 107-9.

712. Tim Bale & André Krouwel, "Down but Not Out: A Comparison of Germany's CDU/CSU with Christian Democratic Parties in Austria, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands", *German Politics* (2013), 16-45, 19.

713. Clemens, "Helmut Kohl's CDU and German unification", 35.

and her decision to permit a free vote on same-sex marriage in 2017 attested.⁷¹⁴ However, as will be discussed later, the subsequent shift back to social conservatism, especially on issues relating to immigration, under current Union leader, Friedrich Merz, suggests that social conservatism remains a prominent feature of the German centre-right. Among others in this respect, this social conservatism of the centre-right aligns with two of the three principles of the European centre-: conservatism and non-cosmopolitanism, in the sense that it is supportive of conservative institutions such as the family.

Social market economy

Throughout its history, a key feature of German Christian democracy is its support for the social market economy, which was characterised as a third way between classical liberalism and Marxism. The social market economy was heavily influenced by Weimar-era economists, whose ideas were collectively known as ordoliberalism.⁷¹⁵

A reaction to the boom-and-bust cycles seen during the thirties,⁷¹⁶ ordoliberalism is centred on the idea that functioning markets are vital to guarantee the future of society.⁷¹⁷ However, unlike classical liberals, ordoliberals believe that, left to their own devices, markets cannot survive unaided. This is due to the inherent desire of market participants to avoid competitive pressures by establishing monopolies.⁷¹⁸ As such, a pure free market economy would not in itself allow human beings to reach their full potential,⁷¹⁹ guarantee economic stability or even be conducive to democracy.⁷²⁰ To address this, the state must intervene to

714. Clayton Marc Clemens, "Beyond Christian Democracy? Welfare State Politics and Policy in a Changing CDU", *German Politics* (2013), 191-211

715. Mitchell, *Origins of Christian democracy*, 154

716. Anthony Nicholls, *The Bonn republic: West German democracy 1945-1990* (London: Longman, 1990), 60

717. Thomas Biebricher and Frieder Vogelmann, "Introduction", in Thomas Biebricher and Frieder Vogelmann (eds.), *The birth of austerity: German ordoliberalism and contemporary neoliberalism* (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 1-25, 4

718. Thomas Biebricher, "Europe and the political philosophy of neoliberalism", *Contemporary Political Theory* (2013), 338-375, 340.

719. A.J. Nicholls, *Freedom with responsibility: The social market economy in Germany 1918-1963* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 390-1.

720. Mitchell, *Origins of Christian democracy*, 154.

guarantee effective competition by preventing any market participants from gaining too much power.⁷²¹ Economically, this meant opposition to nationalisation and collectivism, but also to classical liberalism. Moreover, unlike Keynesianism, it rejects the use of expansionary fiscal policy as a means of stimulating economic growth. This is because ordoliberals reject measures that merely regulate demand and not the markets' supply structure.⁷²²

While supporting welfare provision, the social market economy also stresses the importance of helping people to help themselves as opposed to encouraging them to rely on the state. Thus, to foster self-reliance, Christian democrat policy aimed to ensure that wage earners especially earned enough to support their families.⁷²³ This also meant that Christian democrats strongly support the insurance principle – which strongly links payments received to contributions made – and which has been a feature of the German welfare system since the days of Otto von Bismarck (Chancellor of Germany between 1871 and 1890).⁷²⁴ Finally, reflecting the Catholic social teaching, Christian democrats also expect family members to help those in need before those individuals are entitled to help from the state.⁷²⁵

Partly because of its ingrained support for the social market economy and the relative success of the post-war German economy, support for economic liberalism – more radical economically liberal ideas than those of ordoliberalism – remained relatively weak within the Union parties until the early twenty-first century.⁷²⁶ As will be seen, while the Union, under Merkel, briefly flirted with economically liberal ideas at the 2005 election, the negative reaction they received at the ballot box soon prompted a retreat.⁷²⁷ Nevertheless, we should highlight that the

721. Biebricher, "Introduction", 5.

722. *Ibid.*, 5.

723. Fanning, *Three roads to the welfare state*, 197.

724. Trentmann, *Out of the darkness*, 629.

725. Susan Tester, "Implications of subsidiarity for the care of older people in Germany", *Social Policy & Administration* (1994), 251-62, 253-4.

726. Geppert, "Crisis of the Welfare State", 170-1.

727. *Ibid.* 179.

German centre-right is generally more economically liberal as compared to their main political rivals, the social democrat *Sozialdemokratische Partei* (SDP). So, although its ordoliberalism is broadly economically liberal, it is distinctive to the tenets of the centre-right in other European countries, being more pro-market rather than free-market.

Having described the key tenets of German centre-right philosophy, this Chapter will now consider how those have manifested in Germany since 1945.

History of the German centre-right

From ruins to *Wirtschaftswunder*, 1945-69

For the centre-right to prosper in the new Germany, past divisions would first have to be overcome. Neither under the German Reich (1933-1943), the German Empire (1871-1918) or the democratic Weimar Republic (1918-1933) has there been a single large centre-right party that could cut across all the important social and denominational lines.⁷²⁸

None of the Weimar-era right-wing parties offered a viable post-war template for a German centre-right. The largest conservative force in Weimar-era Germany was the Protestant-dominated and anti-semitic German National People's Party (DNVP). Although it moderated in the mid-1920s, it then lurched further to the right, saw its vote share collapse and ultimately entered into coalition with the Nazis before being dissolved a few months later in 1933.⁷²⁹ Another centre-right party, the pro-business⁷³⁰ right-liberal German People's Party (DVP) never captured more than 14% of the vote⁷³¹ and became effectively

728. Nicholls, *Bonn Republic*, 41.

729. Edmund Fawcett, *Conservatism: The fight for a tradition* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), 191-4. For the relationship between the DNVP and the Nazis, see Hermann Beck, *The Fateful Alliance: German Conservatives and Nazis in 1933: The Machtergreifung in a New Light* (New York; Oxford, Berghahn, 2010).

730. Fawcett, *Conservatism*, 193.

731. Larry Eugene Jones, *The German right, 1918-1930: political parties, organized interests, and patriotic associations in the struggle against Weimar Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 111

extinct by the thirties.⁷³² The closest that Germany had to the Union parties before 1945 was the Centre Party,⁷³³ which was originally established to protect Catholic interests in a German Empire, which was two-thirds Protestant.⁷³⁴ However, while it provided over half of Weimar Germany's Chancellors,⁷³⁵ it never broadened its appeal to Protestant voters.⁷³⁶

The CDU was founded in 1945. To overcome Weimar-era divisions, the party's identity was based on non-denominational Christianity. Untainted by Nazism or Marxism, this helped to overcome the regional and sectarian divides that had plagued the German right before the Nazi rise to power.⁷³⁷ The inter-denominational cooperation was made easier by the fact that the largely Protestant east now fell within the Soviet zone, easing Catholic fears about being dominated by Protestants.⁷³⁸ As such, the new CDU represented the first time that the German centre-right coalesced around a single mainstream political party.⁷³⁹

Soon gaining ascendancy within the new CDU was Konrad Adenauer, a former Centre Party member and Lord Mayor of Cologne who had been dismissed by the Nazis in 1933 and spent several months imprisoned by them in 1944.⁷⁴⁰ After another brief stint as Lord Mayor in 1945, Adenauer became the British Zone's CDU Chairman in 1946.⁷⁴¹ With his existing reputation as a capable administrator, Adenauer was ideally placed to lead the new party into its first election.⁷⁴²

The first elections to the West German *Bundestag*, held in 1949,

732. German Bundestag, "The political parties in the Weimar Republic", https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/189776/01b7ea57531a60126da86e2d5c5dbb78/parties_weimar_republic.pdf (2006).

733. Wiliarty, "How the Christian Democrats manage to adapt", 148.

734. Fawcett, *Conservatism*, 130-1.

735. German Bundestag, "The Weimar Republic (1918 – 1933)", <https://www.bundestag.de/en/parliament/history/parliamentarism/weimar> (2015).

736. Geoffrey Pridham, *Christian Democracy in Western Germany: The CDU/CSU in government and opposition, 1945-1976* (London; New York: Routledge, 1977, 2014 ed.), 26-8.

737. Martina Steber, "Christianity and party ideology", 35; Nicholls, *Bonn Republic*, 41.

738. van Kersbergen, *Social capitalism*, 64.

739. Granieri, *Ambivalent alliance*, 13-14.

740. Noel D. Cary, *The path to Christian democracy* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 179.

741. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, "Konrad Adenauer", <https://www.kas.de/en/konrad-adenauer> (2025).

742. Cary, *Path to Christian Democracy*, 178.

produced what was, by later standards, a diverse legislature,⁷⁴³ with ten parties represented. However, Adenauer's CDU, running on a platform of a social market economy, emerged as the largest party, winning 139 seats (31% vote share). This was ahead of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), which pledged a heavily socialist approach,⁷⁴⁴ on 29%. This allowed the CDU to form a coalition government with the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) and the Deutsche Partei (DP).⁷⁴⁵ Adenauer would remain Chancellor until 1963.

The challenges facing the new Adenauer Government, however, were immense. In addition to having been split from the GDR, a further quarter of Germany's total pre-1937 land area was lost to Poland and the Soviet Union. Combined with the expulsions of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe in the mid-to-late-forties, this meant that some 7.5 million German refugees flooded into West Germany by 1950, all of whom needed to be housed and fed.⁷⁴⁶ At the same time, the country had a massive housing shortage – some 22% of the Federal Republic's pre-1939 homes had been destroyed beyond repair with a further 23% sustaining at least some damage.⁷⁴⁷ Additionally, the Federal Republic remained under allied occupation until sovereignty was largely restored in 1955.

While he may famously have campaigned on the slogan “no experiments,” demonstrating pragmatism, in several key ways Adenauer changed Germany's direction considerably,⁷⁴⁸ with Christian democracy providing the ideal tonic to the country's ills.

On the foreign policy front, Adenauer's Union – by 1949, CDU was already allied with CSU – firmly anchored West Germany in the western

743. Christoph Hasselbach, “Germany remembers its first post-WWII national election”, Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-remembers-its-first-national-election-after-the-nazi-dictatorship/a-69928911> (2024).

744. Kees van Kersbergen, *Social capitalism: A study of Christian democracy and the welfare state* (London: Routledge, 1995), 74–5.

745. Nicholls, *Bonn Republic*, 72.

746. Nicholls, *Freedom with responsibility*, 122.

747. Jeffrey M. Diefendorf, *In the wake of war: The reconstruction of German cities after World War II* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 108.

748. Trentmann, *Out of the darkness*, 176.

alliance system, seeing this as the most effective way to rehabilitate Germany's image abroad and entrench support for democracy at home.⁷⁴⁹ West Germany was one of the original six signatories to the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which established the European Economic Community (EEC). More controversially, Adenauer took West Germany into NATO 1955 and introduced conscription in 1956.⁷⁵⁰ When Joseph Stalin in 1952 offered German unification in exchange for permanent neutrality, Adenauer refused. This was not just because he doubted the sincerity of the Soviet leader, but because of his desire to keep West Germany in the western alliance.⁷⁵¹

While support for the Western alliance remained the priority, the Union under Adenauer never abandoned support for German reunification.⁷⁵² Declaring itself the sole successor state to the former German Reich (1871-1945), Bonn also refused to establish diplomatic relations with any state, except the Soviet Union, that recognised the GDR – the so-called Hallstein doctrine.⁷⁵³ Under the influence of former expellees – that is, those ethnic Germans expelled to Germany after the Second World War – the Union also refused to recognise the loss of Germany's former eastern territories.⁷⁵⁴

A strong economy allowed Adenauer to implement the social market economy. It helped that the early post-war years were characterised by rapid economic growth – GDP increased by an average of 8.2% between 1950 and 1960, a period which became known as the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or 'economic miracle'.⁷⁵⁵ In 1957, for example, pensions were indexed to the cost of living, which helped to spread the benefits of West Germany's newfound prosperity.⁷⁵⁶ In addition, West Germany witnessed a

749. Clay Clemens, *Reluctant realists: The Christian Democrats and West German Ostpolitik* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1989), 18-19.

750. Trentmann, *Out of the darkness*, 145-6, 375.

751. Hoyer, *Beyond the wall*, 119-21.

752. Clemens, *Reluctant realists*, 24-8.

753. Hoyer, *Beyond the wall*, 156.

754. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A history of Europe since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2007), 270.

755. Nicholls, *Bonn republic*, 95.

756. Dennis L. Bark and David R. Gressm *A history of West Germany vol. 1: From shadow to substance, 1945-1963* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 396-7; Nicholls, *Bonn Republic*, 151-2.

massive housebuilding programme, with some DM 91 billion (roughly €250 billion today) spent on new homes between 1950 and 1959. New apartments were completed at an astonishing rate of one per minute after 1953.⁷⁵⁷ This meant that, by 1959, the country's housing shortage had fallen by 80%.⁷⁵⁸

While keen to expand the welfare state, the Adenauer government did this on centre-right lines. Building on the system established under Otto von Bismarck, social insurance remained at the core of the welfare system. While means-tested support existed for those unable to rely on insurance, this was intended as a last resort. Further reflecting a conservative preference for working through existing institutions, key services, such as hospitals and care homes, continued to be administered by church agencies such as the Catholic Caritas or the Protestant Inner Mission even though funding came from the state.⁷⁵⁹

Additionally, while eschewing the 'conservative' label itself, the Union, reflecting its nature as a 'catch-all party,' was happy to draw votes from self-described conservatives. Although there was an explicitly conservative party, the German Party (DP), which served as a junior coalition partner in the first Union-led governments, it lost its remaining parliamentary seats in 1961.⁷⁶⁰ The CDU was the main beneficiary of this, with Chancellor Konrad Adenauer publicly expressing his delight at having absorbed the DP, a party which "had so much in common with the CDU at a deep level".⁷⁶¹

Having narrowly emerged victorious in 1949, Adenauer was rewarded with further election victories in 1953 and 1957 when the Union became the only bloc in the Federal Republic's history to win an outright parliamentary majority.⁷⁶² In 1961, however, the Union was

757. Bark and Gress, *From Shadow to substance*, 395.

758. Ibid.

759. Trentmann, "Out of the darkness", 633.

760. Gordon Smith, "The moderate right in the German party system", in Peter Merkl (ed.), *The Federal Republic of Germany at forty five* (Houndmills: Basingstoke, 1995), 265.

761. Quoted in Steber, *Guardians of concepts*, 133.

762. The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 3rd German Bundestag on 15 September 1957", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/1957.html> (2025).

once again forced into a coalition with the FDP, although it remained ahead of the SPD.⁷⁶³

Adenauer finally retired in 1963 and was succeeded by Ludwig Erhard. However, Erhard's reign was not to last — amidst economic difficulties, the FDP withdrew support for his government and, seeing no other way to remain in office, the Union instead formed a grand coalition with the SPD under yet another Chancellor, Kurt Georg Kiesinger.⁷⁶⁴

This marked the beginning of the end of the CDU's long reign. The Union has been in office continuously for 20 years and the SPD campaigned well going into the 1969 *Bundestag* elections.⁷⁶⁵ However, while losing office, the Union still outperformed the SPD, securing 46% of the vote to the SPD's 43%. It was only the defection of the FDP and its 31 seats that allowed the SPD to seize power.⁷⁶⁶

Opposition years, 1969-1982

After failing to form a government in 1969, the Union remained in the political wilderness for 13 years, blocked from power by the FDP. This remains its longest spell in opposition to date. SPD's Willy Brandt remained Chancellor until 1976, when he was succeeded by Helmut Schmidt, who remained Chancellor until the Union's return to power in 1982.⁷⁶⁷

In a major break with the Adenauer era, Brandt's SPD-led Government abandoned the Hallstein doctrine in favour of *Ostpolitik*, which meant recognising Soviet control over Eastern Europe and the loss of Germany's former eastern territories.⁷⁶⁸ In 1972 the two German

763. The Federal Returning Officer, "Start Bundestag election 1961 Election to the 4th German Bundestag on 17 September 1961", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/1961.html> (2025).

764. Ludger Helms, "The Grand Coalition: Precedents and prospects", in Eric Langenbacher (ed.), *Launching the Grand Coalition: The 2005 Bundestag election and the future of German politics* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2006), 49-68, 50-1.

765. Geoffrey Pridham, *Christian Democracy in Western Germany* (London: Routledge, 1977, 2015 reprint), 181-2.

766. The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 6th German Bundestag on 28 September 1969", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/1969.html> (2025).

767. Craig Whitney, "The painful road to Brandt's resignation", *New York Times*, 23 May 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/05/23/archives/the-painful-road-to-brandts-resignation-leadership-failure-as-well.html>.

768. David R. Gress and Dennis L. Bark, *Democracy and its discontents* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 158, 182-3, 186-8.

states concluded a treaty recognising each other's sovereignty and exchanged permanent representatives in 1974.⁷⁶⁹ For his efforts, Brandt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.⁷⁷⁰

For most of its spell in opposition, the Union opposed the SPD's *Ostpolitik*, which it feared would entrench the division of Germany, but its stance had softened by 1982.⁷⁷¹ There were several reasons for this shift. On a practical level, pulling out of the treaties would not only have antagonised the communist states but also the FRG's western allies.⁷⁷² Domestic political factors also played a role – while remaining wary of the Soviets, most West Germans appeared to support a policy that, by improving contacts with its neighbours, gave the country a less hostile foreign policy. One survey in 1980, for example, found that only 20% of West Germans thought *Ostpolitik* had not been worth pursuing.⁷⁷³ The CDU's pragmatism prevailed here.

Beyond its shift towards accepting *Ostpolitik*, however, the CDU did not radically alter its philosophical approach while in opposition. While keen to modernise the party's image, the CDU's new leader after 1973, Helmut Kohl, saw little reason to adopt policy offerings that could limit his room for political manoeuvre.⁷⁷⁴ Moreover, support for the social market economy, which was associated with West Germany's post-war economic success,⁷⁷⁵ meant that there was less desire to rethink the CDU's attitude towards the state than in centre-right parties elsewhere.⁷⁷⁶ Reflecting its social conservatism, the CDU opposed an attempt by the SPD Government in 1974 to liberalise West Germany's abortion laws.⁷⁷⁷

769. Gress and Bark, *Democracy and its discontents*, 323.

770. Craig R. Whitney, "The painful road to Brandt's resignation", *New York Times*, 23 May 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/05/23/archives/the-painful-road-to-brandts-resignation-leadership-failure-as-well.html>

771. Clemens, *Reluctant realists*, 1-2.

772. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

773. *Ibid.*, 243-5.

774. Clay Clemens, "Helmut Kohl's CDU and German unification: The price of success", *German Politics and Society* (1991), 33-44, 33-4.

775. Martina Steber, "A Better Tomorrow. Making Sense of Time in the Conservative Party and the CDU/CSU in the 1960s and 1970s", *Journal of Modern European History* (2015), 317-337, 328, 332.

776. Geppert, "Crisis of the welfare state", 174.

777. Trentmann, *Out of the darkness*, 243-4.

Reflecting the continuing appeal of Christian democrat ideas, the Union's electoral position was not as weak as its 13-year spell of opposition might suggest. While going slightly backwards at the 1972 and 1976 elections relative to 1969, it still captured over 42% of the vote on both occasions.⁷⁷⁸ At the 1980 *Bundestag* election, it once again emerged as the largest party,⁷⁷⁹ only remaining locked out of power by the FDP.

Ultimately, changed economic conditions and political loyalties, rather than policy shifts, propelled the West German centre-right back into government. In 1981, GDP shrank for the first time since 1949 and, the following year, unemployment reached 8%.⁷⁸⁰ When the SDP Chancellor Schmidt refused the FDP's demand in 1983 to adopt liberalising measures such as reigning in the budget deficit and cutting welfare spending, the FDP switched its support from the SPD to the Union, enabling Kohl to become Chancellor.⁷⁸¹ The government therefore changed without an election. The Union would remain in office, in coalition with the FDP, until 1998. The Union thus regained power without substantially altering its core principles.

The era of Kohl and reunification, 1982-1998

Despite promising change upon taking office, Kohl's Chancellorship was initially marked by continuity. While there was tension with the CSU over the issue of *Ostpolitik*, Kohl maintained the SPD's line, establishing a personal rapport with East Germany's leader Erich Honecker.⁷⁸² With the Cold War ongoing, Kohl also maintained the Union's firm support for NATO and supported the deployment of US-manufactured Pershing

778. The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 7th German Bundestag on 19 November 1972", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/1972.html> (2025); The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 8th German Bundestag on 3 October 1976", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/1976.html> (2025).

779. The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 9th German Bundestag on 5 October 1980", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/1980.html> (2025).

780. David P. Conradt, "The end of an era in West Germany", *Current History* (1982), 405-8.

781. Conradt, "End of an era", 405; Peter C. Caldwell and Karrin Hanshew, *Germany since 1945: Politics, culture, and society* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 222.

782. R.E.M. Irving and W.E. Peterson, "The West German general election of 1987", *Parliamentary Affairs* (1987), 333-46, 341; Hoyer, *Beyond the wall*, 359.

missiles on West German soil despite considerable public opposition.⁷⁸³

Domestically, while it paused new social security spending to address the budget deficit and privatised some state-owned companies – such as the national flag carrier, Lufthansa – there was no drastic restructuring of the social market economy.⁷⁸⁴ Echoing the German centre-right's preference for consensus, as well as the need to keep the FDP onside, Kohl avoided enacting potentially divisive economic or social reforms,⁷⁸⁵ although he did enact some modest changes. Thus, in 1986, the Kohl Government established a 'Mother and Child' fund to assist pregnant women in financial difficulty and, two years later, introduced West Germany's first parental leave scheme, albeit one that provided modest, flat-rate, benefits.⁷⁸⁶

Initially, this paid dividends – Kohl's Union secured election victories in 1983⁷⁸⁷ and again in 1987, despite several corruption scandals.⁷⁸⁸

However, this preference for consensus above all else gradually weakened the Union's standing and,⁷⁸⁹ by 1989, Kohl's government appeared in serious trouble. At the 1989 European Parliamentary elections, the Union recorded its worst-ever national result: just 38% of the vote. At the same time, the Union was struggling with divisions between modernisers and traditionalists over how to respond to the rise of a new right-wing party, the Republicans, who had secured 7% at both the European and Berlin city elections.⁷⁹⁰ The CDU's Secretary-General, Heiner Geissler, attempted to remove Kohl as leader.⁷⁹¹ Fortunately for Kohl and the Union, however, German reunification "came as a *deus ex*

783. Caldwell and Hanshaw, *Germany since 1945*, 220.

784. *Ibid.*, 228-92.

785. Geppert, "Crisis of the welfare state", 173-5.

786. Peter Starke, "The German welfare state", in Klaus Larres, Holger Moroff and Ruth Wittlinger (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of German politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 304-22; Trentmann, *Out of the darkness*, 638; Nicholls, *Bonn Republic*, 287.

787. The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 10th German Bundestag on 6 March 1983", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/1983.html> (2025).

788. Caldwell and Hanshaw, *Germany since 1945*, 239.

789. Geppert, "Crisis of the welfare state", 173.

790. Clay Clemens "Helmut Kohl's CDU and German unification: The Price of Success", *German Politics & Society* (1991), 36-8.

791. Wolfram Bickerich "A German giant: The Political Legacy of Helmut Kohl", *Spiegel*, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/former-german-chancellor-helmut-kohl-dies-at-87-a-1152601.html> (2017).

machina” to revive their sagging fortunes.⁷⁹²

As the East German communist regime rapidly imploded, Kohl seized his chance to fulfil a longstanding Christian democrat ambition and a place in history. Sensing that reunification was popular in the East, Kohl publicly expressed his support for the idea on a visit to Dresden in December 1989. He then encouraged the holding of early elections in East Germany and offered support to a coalition of pro-unification parties, the Alliance for Germany, led by the newly-independent East German CDU, therefore paving the way for German reunification the following year, as explicated in detail in Box 6.2 below.⁷⁹³

Box 6.2. German reunification

Until 1989, reunification appeared a distant prospect. Indeed, in September 1987, East German leader Erich Honneker was received in Bonn “with full honours” as though for a foreign leader.⁷⁹⁴ However, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s liberalising reforms in the Soviet Union and his commitment to allow its satellite states in Eastern Europe, including the GDR, to choose their own path, paved the way for the GDR’s downfall. While the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, East Germany’s communist ruling party between 1949 and 1989) under Erich Honneker resisted copying Gorbachev, events forced the SED’s hand. Amidst a growing exodus of GDR citizens to the West – over 100,000 left between January and September 1989 – and the outbreak of mass demonstrations, Honneker, the East German leader, was forced to resign and the SED regime collapsed. Most symbolically, the Berlin Wall, which had divided the city for nearly three decades, fell on the ninth of November 1989, symbolising the end of the Cold War.⁷⁹⁵

792. E.M. Irving and W.E. Peterson, “The 1990 German federal election”, *Parliamentary Affairs* (1991), 353-72, 357
793. Matthias Oppermann, “From Fall of the Wall to Unity”, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, <https://www.kas.de/en/from-fall-of-the-wall-to-unity> (2025), Bickerich, “The Political Legacy of Helmut Kohl”.

794. Hoyer, *Beyond the wall*, 360

795. Trentmann, *Out of Darkness*, 507-17.

When the Alliance for Germany won the East's only free and fair elections, securing 48% of the vote,⁷⁹⁶ the die was cast. While there was some reluctance among Allied leaders – notably UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, as well as the nascent Polish government, which was scared for the security of its western border – agreement was reached between the German states and the four Allied powers, paving the way for Germany to reunite on the first of October 1990. On that day, the GDR ceased to exist, with the five newly reconstituted East German *Länder*, as well as newly reunited Berlin, acceding to the Federal Republic. In effect, West Germany peacefully annexed the former East. In 1999, the seat of government returned to Berlin.⁷⁹⁷

Reflecting Christian democrat policy since Adenauer's day, the united Germany remained in NATO and the European Economic Community, which in 1992 became the European Union.⁷⁹⁸ Its commitment to western internationalism remained core.

However, this rushed approach to reunification later created problems in both East and West. The enormous fiscal transfers from West to East, estimated at between €1.6 and €2 trillion and which were partially financed by additional 5.5% 'solidarity tax' levied on income and corporation taxes, generated resentment among western taxpayers.⁷⁹⁹ More seriously, as will be discussed later, the difficulties associated with the transition in the East from a planned to a market economy would later help to fuel both left and right-wing populism at the expense of the political centre. The Christian democrat principles which had proven so successful in post-war West Germany did not necessarily hold the same appeal for the residents of the former GDR.

In the short term, however, the results transformed the Union's

796. Deutscher Bundestag, "The freely elected People's Chamber", https://www.bundestag.de/en/parliament/history/parliamentarism/peoples_chamber/peoples_chamber-201326 (2025).

797. Hans Kundnani, "'Berlin Republic' gets down to business in reborn Reichstag", *The Guardian*, 18 April 1999.

798. Trentmann, *Out of the darkness*, 518-20.

799. Trentmann, *Out of the darkness*, 525-6; Deutsche Welle, "Is Germany's government done boosting the lagging East?", <https://www.dw.com/en/german-government-moves-to-end-solidarity-tax-for-eastern-germany/a-49983217> (2019).

electoral fortunes, as it was rewarded for having presided over reunification. Kohl's approval ratings, for example, increased from 34% in October 1989 to 64% by October 1990.⁸⁰⁰ At the first all-German elections since 1933, the Union again emerged as the largest bloc.⁸⁰¹

By its final term in office, however, the Union "bumbled along with neither political élan nor a plan".⁸⁰² The Kohl Government did, however, modestly extend the welfare system with the introduction of care insurance, to cover some, but not all, of the costs of care in old age. Reflecting the German centre-right's approach to the social market economy, contributions were expected from employees as well as employers.⁸⁰³ It also, in 1992, introduced the first statutory entitlement to childcare between the ages three and six.⁸⁰⁴

While there was talk of further reforms to the welfare system and employment laws to boost investment – the Government proposed, among other measures, to reduce employer-funded sick pay from 100% to 80% of an employee's salary and allow firms with ten or fewer workers to dismiss them without fear of legal action⁸⁰⁵ – Kohl's preference for consensus and unwillingness to risk destabilising his coalition meant that little was achieved.⁸⁰⁶ Consequently, amidst a weakening economy – unemployment almost hit 10% in 1997⁸⁰⁷ – and a social market economy increasingly strained by an ageing population, rising unemployment and the enormous costs of reunification,⁸⁰⁸ the German centre-right could only capitalise on reunification for so long. Accordingly, while it once again emerged as the largest party at the 1994

800. Irving and Paterson, "1990 German federal election", 349-50.

801. The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 12th German Bundestag on 2 December 1990", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/1990.html> (2024).

802. Bickerich, "The Political Legacy of Helmut Kohl".

803. Trentmann, *Out of the darkness*, 643-4.

804. Starke, "German welfare state", 315.

805. Alan Cowell, "Kohl offers plan for big cuts in the German welfare state", *New York Times*, 27 April 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/27/world/kohl-offers-plan-for-big-cuts-in-the-german-welfare-state.html>.

806. Clay Clemens, "The last hurrah: Helmut Kohl's CDU/CSU and the 1998 election", in David P. Conradt, Gerald R. Kleinfeld and Christian Sørensen (eds.), *Power shift in Germany: The 1998 election and the end of the Kohl era* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), 38-58, 40-1.

807. Macrotrends, "Germany Unemployment Rate 1991-2025", <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/DEU/germany/unemployment-rate> (2025).

808. Clay Clemens, "Kohl's legacy: The CDU/CSU in a new era", in Peter H. Merkl (ed.), *The Federal Republic at fifty: The end of a century of turmoil* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 100-11, 104.

elections, it only did so by eight seats.⁸⁰⁹

Kohl's long Chancellorship finally came to an end in 1998 following his defeat at the hands of Gerhard Schröder's revived SPD. After 16 years in power, the electorate was ready for change.⁸¹⁰ Having pivoted the SPD to a more centrist position at the 1998 election and "a redefinition of the welfare state so as to rely more on market forces," Schröder made it hard for the CDU to attack him from the right.⁸¹¹ At that election, the SPD comfortably emerged as the largest party in the *Bundestag* and there followed a seven-year-period of SPD rule under Gerhard Schröder in coalition with the Greens.⁸¹²

From Kohl to Merkel, 1998-2021

Unused to dealing with a centrist SPD, the Union initially struggled to reinvent itself. Making matters worse, its new leader, Wolfgang Schäuble, lasted less than two years in the post after being implicated in a corruption scandal that had also engulfed his predecessor, Helmut Kohl. Schäuble in turn was succeeded by Angela Merkel,⁸¹³ who would remain CDU leader until 2018.⁸¹⁴ An East German, pastor's daughter and physicist by training, Merkel only entered politics at the age of 35 following the collapse of the SED regime.⁸¹⁵ Her long leadership was defined above all by pragmatism.

During his time in office, Schröder's government undertook key labour reforms and welfare, known as Agenda 2010, which alienated

809. The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 13th German Bundestag on 16 October 1994", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/1994.html> (2024).

810. Clemens, "The last hurrah", 38-58.

811. Clay Clemens, "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Merkel's CDU/CSU and the Politics of Welfare State Reform", *German Politics* (2007), 222-246, 224.

812. The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 14th German Bundestag on 27 September 1998", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/1998.html> (2025); The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 15th German Bundestag on 22 September 2002", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2002.html> (2024).

813. Clay Clemens, "Hold the champagne: Edmund Stoiber's CDU/CSU and Bundestagswahl 2002", in David P. Conradt, Gerald R. Kleinfeld and Christian Sørensen (eds.), *A precarious victory: Schroeder and the German elections of 2002* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), 58-82, 59-60.

814. BBC, "Angela Merkel to quit as CDU party leader", <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-46016377> (2018).

815. Clay Clemens, "From the Outside In: Angela Merkel as opposition leader, 2000-05", in Eric Langenbacher (ed.), *Launching the Grand Coalition: The 2005 Bundestag Election and the Future of German Politics* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2006), 150-90, 152-3.

traditional SPD supporters,⁸¹⁶ inducing one disgruntled faction to join with the successor to the East German SED to form the Left Party. Introduced to address Germany's high unemployment levels, which exceeded 11% by 2003, the reforms made it easier for employers to fire workers, reduced welfare spending and shortened the duration of unemployment benefits.⁸¹⁷

With its traditional tenets, such as Christianity, no longer holding the same voter appeal, and the German economy remaining weak, the Union attempted to outflank the SPD to the right on economic liberalism.⁸¹⁸ Before the 2005 election, for example, Merkel announced that Paul Kirchhof, a supporter of flat taxes – taxes that are not subject to different rates depending on income brackets – would be her choice for Finance Minister.⁸¹⁹ This significant break with traditional social market philosophy, however, nearly cost Merkel the Chancellorship, allowing Schröder's SPD, which had been languishing in the polls, to come within a percentage point of Merkel's Union when the votes were counted.⁸²⁰ Merkel would not attempt to become more economically liberal while in government.⁸²¹

Having led the Union to a narrow victory, Merkel would remain Chancellor for 16 years. Her Chancellorship marked a number of departures from traditional Christian democrat policy positions, with the Christian democrats moving in an increasingly non-conservative direction. Conscription was abolished and, following a free vote, same-sex marriage was legalised.⁸²² There were also several departures from the traditional Christian democrat approach to the social market

816. Eric Langenbacher, "Introduction: The drama of 2005 and the future of German politics", in Eric Langenbacher (ed.), *Launching the Grand Coalition: The 2005 Bundestag election and the future of German politics* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2006), 1-12, 1-2.

817. Rebecca Staudenmaier, "Agenda 2010", Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-issues-in-a-nutshell-agenda-2010/a-38789461> (2017).

818. Geppert, "Crisis of the welfare state", 177-8.

819. Geoffrey K. Roberts, "The German Bundestag Election 2005", *Parliamentary Affairs* (2006), 668-81, 673-4.

820. The Federal Returning Officer, "Election to the 16th German Bundestag on 18 September 2005", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2005.html> (2025).

821. Geppert, "Crisis of the welfare state", 177.

822. Patton, "The 'old five'", 218; Sarah E. Wiliarty, "Germany: How the Christian Democrats Manage to Adapt to the Silent Counter-Revolution", in Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Riding the populist wave: Europe's mainstream right in crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 153-4

economy but, this time, in a more leftward direction, presiding over the introduction of a national minimum wage and rent controls.⁸²³ Perhaps most importantly, and despite considerable internal opposition from the CSU, Merkel decided to allow one million refugees, many of whom were fleeing unrest in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, to enter Germany in 2015 – a sign of the German centre-right's unique western internationalism.⁸²⁴

Merkel's legacy has become more contested since her departure from office. The Russian invasion of Ukraine raised questions about Germany's overreliance on cheap Russian gas, which was necessitated by the accelerated phase-out of nuclear energy – the share of German gas imports coming from Russia increased from, 35% in 2012 to 55% in 2018⁸²⁵ – and whether Merkel should have taken a tougher response to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁸²⁶ While Merkel might have acted pragmatically, in an economic sense, at the time, as with her predecessor Helmut Kohl, the failure to act created problems later. Here, Western internationalism was secondary to pragmatism.

The invasion also highlighted concerns around the state of Germany's armed forces, the *Bundeswehr*, which the Union had traditionally supported. By October 2022, for example, it was claimed that the *Bundeswehr* only had enough ammunition for two days of war.⁸²⁷ It did not help that, when Merkel left office, German defence spending was just 1.5% of GDP, well below the NATO target of 2%.⁸²⁸

823. Albrecht von Lucke, "Angela Merkel, Just to be on the Safe Side", in Ernest Hillebrand (ed.), *What went wrong? The German elections 2013 and the score of the SPD*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2013), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/10462.pdf>, 8–10, 9.

824. Patton, "The 'old five'", 218; Wiliarty, "How the Christian Democrats manage to adapt", 153–4; Maia de La Baume, "Angela Merkel defends open border migration policy", Politico, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-defends-open-border-migration-refugee-policy-germany/> (2017); Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, "Migration report 2015: General conclusions", https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/EN/Forschung/Migrationsberichte/migrationsbericht-2015-zentrale-ergebnisse.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=13# (2016), 8.

825. Wolfgang Münchau, *Kaput: The end of the German miracle* (London: Swift Press, 2024), 99

826. Florian Gathmann, Dirk Kurbiuweit und Gerald Traufetter, "Merkel's Legacy on Russia Casts a Shadow over Her Party", *Spiegel*, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/a-few-sanctions-and-that-was-it-merkel-s-legacy-on-russia-casts-a-shadow-over-her-party-a-45130c68-05f4-4161-8d23-982574b15b28> (2022).

827. Ben Knight, "Puma tanks unusable: Is Germany's military unfit for action?", *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/puma-tanks-unusable-is-germanys-military-unfit-for-action/a-63955452> (2022).

828. Leon Mangasarian, "How Angela Merkel broke Germany", *Spectator*, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/how-angela-merkel-broke-germany/> (2024).

Initially, Merkel's pragmatism – the centre-left Friedrich Ebert Stiftung bemoaned her capacity to “absorb anything and everything capable of gaining majority support” – paid dividends for the Union by depriving her opponents of political oxygen.⁸²⁹ At the 2009 election, Merkel's Union outpolled the SPD,⁸³⁰ and, in 2013, the Union's vote share of the vote rose above 40% for the only time so far this century.⁸³¹ However, the Union's position deteriorated once again at the 2017 *Bundestag* election with Merkel's permissive shift on asylum policy, an unusual departure from her and the Union's characteristic pragmatism, playing a large role.⁸³² Significantly, as will be discussed in the challenges section below, the major beneficiary of the Union's decline was the populist AfD.

In October 2018, Merkel finally announced her intention to stand down as CDU Chair, although she remained Chancellor until the parliamentary term ended in 2021.⁸³³ Lacking a clear sense of direction after 16 years in power,⁸³⁴ made worse by a poor election campaign, the 2021 *Bundestag* election was a disaster for the Union parties. Their vote share crashed to a record low 21%, the first time it had ever fallen below 30%.⁸³⁵

Into and out of opposition, 2021-2025

As leader of the largest party, albeit with the smallest ever vote share for a ruling party, the SPD's Olaf Scholz formed a coalition government with the Greens and the FDP. However, after less than three years in

829. von Lucke, “Just to be on the Safe Side”, 8-10, 9.

830. The Federal Returning Officer, “Election to the 17th German Bundestag on 27 September 2009”, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2009.html> (2025).

831. The Federal Returning Officer, “Bundestag election 2013”, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2013/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> (2025).

832. The Federal Returning Officer, “Bundestag election 2017”, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2017/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> (2025).

833. Matthew Karnitschnig, “Merkel's twilight heralds German turmoil”, Politico, <https://www.politico.eu/article/merkel-end-cdu-chancellor-twilight-heralds-german-turmoil-hesse-election-results/> (2018).

834. Ullrich Fichtner, “German Conservatives Need to Take a Step Back”, *Spiegel*, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-post-merkel-era-german-conservatives-need-to-take-a-step-back-a-371b426c-7425-4dc3-b0a8-bfa3195dbdb2> (2021).

835. Melanie Amann, “German Voters Punish Merkel's Party in an Election Without a Clear Victor”, *Spiegel*, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/a-fragmented-party-landscape-german-voters-punish-merkel-party-in-an-election-without-a-clear-victor-a-ccc25451-0146-4438-a240-351ada5d9966> (2021).

office, Scholz's Government collapsed in late 2024 when the FDP withdrew its support, marking it only the second government collapse in German post-war history⁸³⁶ and triggering an early election in February 2025⁸³⁷ which returned the Union to power.

Under its new leader, former Blackrock executive Friedrich Merz,⁸³⁸ CDU policies have come to more closely echo the traditional principles of the European centre-right – especially non-cosmopolitanism and economic liberalism. These included his call to “gradually reintroduce” conscription and to increase defence spending.⁸³⁹ On the economic front, the Union's 2025 election programme called for tax cuts and deregulation,⁸⁴⁰ such as lowering corporate tax rates to a maximum rate of 25% and raising the tax-free threshold for inheritance and land transfer taxes.⁸⁴¹ Most significantly, however, on immigration, Merz firmly broke with the Merkel era by pledging to toughen border controls, including by refusing entry to anyone without valid travel documents.⁸⁴² Controversially, in February 2025, Merz relied on AfD votes to try to pass a *Bundestag* motion to tighten migration, earning a rebuke from Merkel herself.⁸⁴³ However, Merz firmly ruled out breaching the so-called ‘firewall’ (Brandmauer), according to which far-right parties are

836. Sophie Garbe et al., “How Chancellor Olaf Scholz Brought His Coalition to an End”, *Spiegel*, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-end-of-the-german-government-how-chancellor-olaf-scholz-brought-his-coalition-to-an-end-a-7e00fce1-fdd9-4421-993b-194616913fe0> (2024).

837. Nette Nöstlinger and Rixa Fürsen, “German leaders settle on Feb. 23 snap election”, *Politico*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-federal-snap-election-take-place-feb-23-2025/> (2024).

838. Guy Chazan, “Will Friedrich Merz finally become Germany's next chancellor?”, *Financial Times*, 12 May 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/4e9d5120-b97d-47f7-8ed5-7d2f46a6e36e>.

839. Oliver Moody, “German leadership frontrunner wants to bring back conscription”, *The Times*, 5 December 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/europe/article/germany-conscription-army-fight-olaf-scholz-6qlqf7fvc>.

840. Ed Turner, “Who is Friedrich Merz, the man now most likely to lead Germany? Eight things to know”, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/who-is-friedrich-merz-the-man-now-most-likely-to-lead-germany-eight-things-to-know-247643> (2025).

841. Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands and Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern, “Policy change for Germany: CDU CSU election programme”, <https://www.cdu.de/app/uploads/2025/01/wahlprogramm-cdu-csu-kurzfassung-englisch.pdf> (2025).

842. Tetyana Klug, “Fact check: No, Merz didn't promise to close the border”, *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-no-friedrich-merz-did-not-promise-to-close-the-border-before-the-election/a-71771248> (2025).

843. Michelle Pace, “German election: Far-right firewall weakens as immigration concerns take centre stage”, *Chatham House*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/02/german-election-far-right-firewall-weakens-immigration-concerns-take-centre-stage> (2025).

excluded from any role in government.⁸⁴⁴

Arguably, however, the deep unpopularity of the Scholz Government was a more important factor for the Union's revived fortunes than Merz's philosophical shift. Buffeted by a series of challenges ranging from the disruptive effects of the war in Ukraine, rising inflation and sluggish growth – at 0.3% GDP growth in 2023, Germany recorded the slowest economic growth for any major economy⁸⁴⁵ – Scholz struggled to respond effectively. By September 2024, for example, one poll found that 77% of German voters considered Scholz to be a “weak leader”.⁸⁴⁶

Accordingly, while Merz was rewarded at the 2025 *Bundestag* election, which once again saw the Union emerge as the largest parliamentary bloc and become the senior partner in another grand coalition with the SPD,⁸⁴⁷ its share of the vote was just 29%. Shifting rightwards on immigration and economic reform had also done nothing to weaken the AfD, which instead hit a record 21% of the vote. This further indicates that it was the SPD's unpopularity, rather than positive developments on the Union's part, that allowed it to reclaim the Chancellorship.⁸⁴⁸

Since being sworn in as Chancellor in May 2025, Merz has tried to enact his campaign pledges. To bolster the struggling economy, the new Merz Government announced €46 billion in tax cuts, including to corporate tax rates and changes to depreciation and permitting firms to claim 75% of the cost of a new electric vehicle as a tax deduction.⁸⁴⁹ With questions around the future of the western alliance and under pressure from US President Donald Trump for Germany to contribute more to the cost of its

844. Jens Thureau and Elizabeth Schumacher, “Germany: What is the ‘AfD firewall’?”, Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/afd-firewall-germany-political-consensus-explained/a-71457050> (2025).

845. Martin Arnold, “Germany was worst-performing major economy last year”, *Financial Times*, 15 January 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/792a1a09-701c-4c9d-aa77-0d9575d5bda9>.

846. Guy Chazan, “The woes of Olaf Scholz”, *Financial Times*, 13 September 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/a7f7b1e8-589c-47a0-962c-724ba68fee1d>.

847. Jens Thureau, “Germany's Chancellor Friedrich Merz stumbles into office”, Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-chancellor-friedrich-merz-stumbles-into-office/a-72454063> (2025).

848. The Federal Returning Officer, “Bundestag election 2025”, <https://bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2025/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> (2025).

849. Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, “Friedrich Merz plans €46bn corporate tax breaks to revive German economy”, *Financial Times*, 4 June 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/ec3e35ea-3c8d-414d-a45f-75be9881a363>.

own defence,⁸⁵⁰ it further announced a €500 billion injection to strengthen the Bundeswehr.⁸⁵¹ While it is far too soon to assess the long-term impact of these policies on the German centre-right's political fortunes, as of June 2025 the Union remained ahead in national opinion polls, with 27% support, albeit with AfD just four percentage points behind, on 24%.⁸⁵²

Contemporary challenges

Having traced the evolution of the German centre-right since 1945, several challenges stand out: the splintering of the political system, the rise of the populist right; and the continued alienation of East Germany more than three decades after reunification.

The splintering of the political system

The German party system has significantly fragmented in recent times. Although the first *Bundestag*, elected in 1949, contained ten parties, these soon consolidated and, between the sixties and eighties, the two major established parties (Union and SPD), representing the centre-right and centre-left respectively, always won more than 80% of the vote at *Bundestag* elections. At the 1976 election, they won 91%. Yet, in 2021, this fell to just under 50%⁸⁵³ and, at the 2025 *Bundestag* elections, to just 45%.⁸⁵⁴

Unsurprisingly, this fragmentation has created a much less wieldy *Bundestag*. Whereas under the so-called “2.5 party system” between 1961 and 1983 only three parties were represented in the *Bundestag* – the Union, SPD and FDP⁸⁵⁵ – after the 2021 elections there were

850. Anne-Sylvaine Chassany and John Paul Rathbone, “Germany backs Donald Trump goal for Nato to spend 5% of GDP on defence”, *Financial Times*, 15 May 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/b9275241-2f67-4f51-b86f-fa292bd9f526>.

851. Sabine Kinkartz, “€1 trillion impact: What easing debt brake means for Germany”, *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/1-trillion-impact-what-easing-debt-brake-means-for-germany/a-71949959> (2025).

852. Sabine Kinkartz, “Germany: Voter trust in US and Israel decreasing”, *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-voter-trust-in-us-and-israel-decreasing/a-72796059> (2025).

853. Patton, “The ‘old five’”, 217.

854. The Federal Returning Officer, “21st Bundestag election”, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/> (2025).

855. Michael Angenendt, Simon D. Brause, “The long way towards polarized pluralism: Party and party system Change in Germany”, in Thomas Poguntke and Wilhelm Hofmeister (eds), *Political Parties and the Crisis of Democracy: Organization, Resilience, and Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 82–107, 83–4.

six, with the Left, the Greens and AfD also represented.⁸⁵⁶ While the process began with the entry of the Greens into the *Bundestag* in 1983 – according to analysis by Dr Heinz Brandenburg the German party system was 80% more fragmented in 2021 than it had been in 2002.⁸⁵⁷

The splintering has continued in recent years with the formation of the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), whose combination of economic leftism with anti-cosmopolitanism and opposition to providing support to Ukraine saw it come within 0.03 percentage points of crossing the 5% threshold for *Bundestag* representation at the 2025 election.⁸⁵⁸ While the BSW's narrow failure, combined with the FDP's crashing out of the *Bundestag* after falling below the 5% threshold, has now left only five parties in the *Bundestag*, there is no reason to assume the splintering trend will reverse.

This growing political fragmentation complicates the formation of viable coalition governments. Once rare, cross-ideological coalitions have become the norm. Thus, while the Federal Republic only experienced one grand coalition between 1949 and 2005, there have been four so far this century, between 2005 and 2009; 2013 and 2017; 2017 and 2021; and, most recently, after the 2025 election.⁸⁵⁹ Moreover, the 2021 election produced Germany's first-ever three-party coalition at the federal level which,⁸⁶⁰ as aforementioned, also became only the second German government to collapse since 1949.

If the trend continues, there is even a risk that forming coalitions – at least comprised solely of mainstream parties – will become impossible. This has already happened at the *Länder* level. For example, the Thuringia state in 2019 saw a coalition of centrist parties become

856. The Federal Returning Officer, "Bundestag election 2021", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> (2025).

857. Heinz Brandenburg, "Thematic Introduction: The party system", in Ross Campbell and Louise K. Davidson-Schmich (eds.), *The 2021 German federal election* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 49-60, 52.

858. The Federal Returning Officer, "Bundestag election 2025", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2025/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> (2025).

859. Alex Berry et al, "Bundestag elects Merz as German chancellor in 2nd vote", Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/bundestag-elects-merz-as-german-chancellor-in-2nd-vote/live-72443927> (2025).

860. Sabine Kinkartz, "Germany's coalition government falls apart — how it happened", Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-coalition-government-falls-apart-how-it-happened/a-70717066> (2024).

mathematically impossible after CDU, SPD, Greens and FDP were collectively outnumbered by the populist left and right.⁸⁶¹

As well as making it more difficult to enact reforms,⁸⁶² philosophically diverse coalitions also deprive voters of choice. By effectively turning coalitions “into musical-chair arrangements of the same parties,” they effectively leave the hard right and hard left parties as “the only real opposition”.⁸⁶³ The German reluctance to form minority governments, which are partially blamed for facilitating Hitler’s rise to power,⁸⁶⁴ only makes it more difficult to avoid them. Such conditions make it harder for the German centre-right to provide a distinctive offering.

Rise of the populist right

Especially concerning from a German centre-right perspective has been the rise of the populist Alternative for Germany (AfD).

While growing anti-establishment sentiment has hurt both the centre-left and centre-right since the eighties, with the emergence of the Greens and the Left in the nineties, the SPD was until recently the main victim. Now, however, the centre-right is also being squeezed.⁸⁶⁵

As already mentioned, since the foundation of the Federal Republic, there have been a series of small parties to the right of the Union: the German National Party (NPD) and the Republicans. Plagued by internal splits and a taboo against the far-right, they sometimes gained seats at state level, but all struggled to gain representation at the *Bundestag* level.⁸⁶⁶

By contrast, the AfD has broken through. Initially founded as a

861. Angenendt and Brause, “The long way towards polarized pluralism”, 82.

862. *Ibid.*, 92-3

863. Wolfgang Münchau, “The far right’s triumph has left Germany in a mess”, *New Statesman*, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2024/09/far-rights-triumph-has-left-germany-mess-afd> (2024).

864. Steffen Ganghof and Christian Stecker, “Investiture rules in Germany: Stacking the deck against minority governments”, in Bjørn Erik Rasch, Shane Martin and José Antonio Cheibub (eds.), *Parliaments and Government Formation: Unpacking Investiture Rules* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 67-85, 80.

865. Angenendt and Brause, “The long way towards polarized pluralism”, 86-7.

866. Michael A. Hansen and Jonathan Olsen, “The Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the 2021 federal election: down but hardly out”, in Ross Campbell and Louise K. Davidson-Schmich (eds.), *The 2021 German federal election* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 141-61, 141-2.

Eurosceptic party opposed to Eurozone bailouts during the early 2010s, including to Greece and Portugal, the AfD shifted its attention towards migration and capitalised heavily by opposing Merkel's 2015 asylum policy. As mentioned earlier, it was rewarded at the 2017 election, winning 13% of the vote and, in doing so, becoming the first party to the right of the Union since the DP in 1957 to win *Bundestag* seats.⁸⁶⁷ Between 2019 and 2021, at the *Länder* level, it also became the second largest party in four eastern states.⁸⁶⁸ While it went slightly backwards at the 2021 *Bundestag* elections, securing 10% of the national vote, it consolidated its position as a political force at the national level.⁸⁶⁹

As previously mentioned, in contrast to the Merkel era, under Friedrich Merz the centre-right has tried to deal with the AfD in part by shifting to more non-consmpolitan positions, especially on immigration. However, while this, along with the Scholz Government's failings, may have helped to propel the Union into first place at the most recent elections, it has done nothing to address the growing support for the AfD, which shows no signs of slowing. In September 2024, for instance, the AfD won the state elections in Thuringia, winning 33% of the vote — the first time a far-right party had triumphed in a state election since 1945.⁸⁷⁰ More recently, as already mentioned, it doubled its vote share at the 2025 *Bundestag* elections, hitting a record 21%.⁸⁷¹ Concerningly, it gained a million votes from the CDU.⁸⁷² Certain aspects of its platform also raised alarm bells, most notably its call for the “remigration” of immigrants, a term originating from the far-right and referring to the deportation even of naturalised citizens.⁸⁷³

867. Matthias Dilling, “Two of the same kind? The rise of the AfD and its implications for the CDU/CSU”, in Erix Langenbacher (ed.), *Twilight of the Merkel era: Power and Politics in Germany after the 2017 Bundestag election* (London: New York, Berghahn, 2019), 191-210.

868. Hansen and Olsen, “The Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the 2021 federal election”, 142.

869. The Federal Returning Officer, “Bundestag election 2021”, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> (2021).

870. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-thuringia-and-saxony-elections-propel-far-right-afd/a-70106147>

871. The Federal Returning Officer, “21st Bundestag election”, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/> (2025).

872. Knight, “Sahra Wagenknecht: Rise and fall of Germany's shooting star”, Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/sahra-wagenknecht-alliance-the-rise-and-fall-of-germanys-shooting-star/a-71741165> (2025).

873. Katja Hoyer, “Alice Weidel is the presentable face of the AfD. And the one its opponents should fear the most”, *The Guardian*, 23 January 2025; Laura Pitel, “Co-leader of Germany's far-right AfD calls for mass deportations”, *Financial Times*, 11 January 2025.

So far, all parties, including the Union, have maintained a ‘firewall’ against any form of co-operation with the AfD, which has faced accusations of extremism⁸⁷⁴ and even calls to have it banned.⁸⁷⁵ Accordingly, there is little chance that the AfD will play any role in whichever government emerges following the recent election. However, if the AfD continues to grow, or even if it maintains its current level of support, this firewall will become harder to sustain. Unless the AfD’s progress is halted, the risk of the populists emerging as the largest party in Germany cannot be ruled out.

Alienation in former East Germany

While there was great hope among East Germans after reunification, this has given way to disillusionment, which has in turn strengthened both the populist left and right.

Despite Kohl’s promise that the former East German states “will soon become blossoming landscapes”,⁸⁷⁶ reunification brought immediate pain and disruption for the former GDR. The transition from socialism to the market economy resulted in massive de-industrialisation.⁸⁷⁷ Inefficient, formerly state-owned, enterprises rapidly collapsed and unemployment soared, hitting 15% in 1994 and 20% in 2004.⁸⁷⁸ Adding insult to injury, the federal government trust charged with privatising former state assets, the *Treuhand*, lacked experience, was widely seen as corrupt and was blamed for liquidating the East’s assets on the cheap for the benefit of westerners.⁸⁷⁹ Just 5% of the *Treuhand*’s assets were sold to East Germans, while 85%, including many of the most valuable, were sold to West

874. Paul Hokenos, “Germany’s Far-Right Party Is Worse Than the Rest of Europe’s”, *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/26/afd-germany-far-right-populism-radical-europe-remigration-immigrants/> (2024).

875. Marcel Fürstenau, “Calls grow in Germany to ban far-right AfD”, *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/calls-grow-in-germany-to-ban-far-right-afd/a-70371841> (2025).

876. Alexander Neubacher and Michael Sauga, “How the East Was Lost”, *Spiegel*, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/germany-s-disappointing-reunification-how-the-east-was-lost-a-703802.html> (2010).

877. Paul Millar, “How Germany’s enduring East-West divide is pushing voters to the fringes”, *France24*,

878. Trentmann, *Out of the darkness*, 523. Paul Millar, “How Germany’s enduring East-West divide is pushing voters to the fringes”, *France 24*, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250224-how-germany-enduring-east-west-divide-pushing-voters-to-fringes-elections-afd-die-linke-migration> (2025).

879. Hoyer, *Beyond the wall*, 414-5.

Germans, resulting in a massive transfer of asset ownership from East to West.⁸⁸⁰ Making matters worse, almost three million people moved from East to West after 1990;⁸⁸¹ especially younger people of working age.⁸⁸²

While the staggering sums spent to rehabilitate the former East Germany produced results, substantial gaps remain between it and the former West Germany. Although salaries and GDP per capita in the former East Germany reached 80% of West German levels by the early noughties, having been at only 53% of West German levels in 1989, they then stagnated and remain at similar levels today as they had in the noughties.⁸⁸³ East Germans also remain under-represented in senior leadership positions. According to one 2023 study, despite making up a fifth of the country's overall population, Easterners hold just 5% of senior jobs in the *Bundeswehr*, the judiciary and business.⁸⁸⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, according to one 2019 survey, almost 60% of East Germans felt they were 'second-class citizens'.⁸⁸⁵

This has had direct political consequences and has recently bred support for the populist right. Ever since reunification, the former GDR has been a stronghold for the successor parties of the former SED; first the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which, following a merger with SPD members disgruntled with Schröder's Agenda 2010, became The Left in 2007.⁸⁸⁶ More recently, the former East has also become the stronghold of the BSW, where, in September 2024, it secured between 10-15% in three

880. Gareth Dale, "How divisions between East and West Germany persist 30 years after reunification", Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/how-divisions-between-east-and-west-germany-persist-30-years-after-reunification-126297> (2019).

881. Federal Statistical Office of Germany, "Migration flows: East-west migration", <https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Society-Environment/Population/Migration/east-west-migration.html> (2025).

882. Tobias Buck, "Eastern Germany on the brink of demographic collapse", *Financial Times*, 9 June 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/05baa6ae-86dd-11e9-a028-86cea8523dc2>.

883. Gareth Dale, "How divisions between East and West Germany persist 30 years after reunification", Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/how-divisions-between-east-and-west-germany-persist-30-years-after-reunification-126297> (2019).

884. Ferenc Gaál, "Study shows Germany's East-West divide in top positions", *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/study-shows-germanys-east-west-divide-in-top-positions/a-66875990> (2023).

885. Tobias Buck, "Many east Germans see themselves as second-class citizens", *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/6fe23e32-df90-11e9-9743-db5a370481bc> (2019).

886. Hartwig Pautz, "Germany's political parties — the newcomers", in Klaus Larres, Holger Moroff and Ruth Wittling (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of German politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 234-48, 235-7.

Eastern Länder elections: Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia.⁸⁸⁷

More concerningly from a centre-right perspective, the CDU now underperforms in the former East relative to the former West, buckling the trend that persisted between 1989 and 2021. Between reunification and 2021, only the 2005 election saw the CDU perform substantially worse in the East than in the West.⁸⁸⁸ In 2021, however, it slumped to third place in four of the five East German states.⁸⁸⁹ In 2025, it finished second in all five.

As the most recent *Bundestag* election indicates, part of the reason for this is that the former GDR has become a firm stronghold of the AfD. At the recent 2025 *Bundestag* elections, the AfD secured 34% of the vote among the five East German states excluding Berlin, well ahead of the 21% it secured nationally.⁸⁹⁰ While it is not the only factor, the difficulties since reunification have played a role in this – some of the AfD's best election results have been in areas hardest hit by falling populations.⁸⁹¹ Moreover, for many former East Germans, the AfD's pledges to protect their hard-won gains from the perceived threats by migrants and globalisation strike a real chord.⁸⁹²

While the reunification of Germany was a remarkable achievement, the failure to address Eastern grievances has played a major role in creating the first real opening for the German populist right since 1945.

This report will now consider the centre-right in Ireland, where the centre-right has recently struggled to maintain its historical dominance and broad appeal.

887. Ben Knight, "Sahra Wagenknecht: Rise and fall of Germany's shooting star", Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/sahra-wagenknecht-alliance-the-rise-and-fall-of-germanys-shooting-star/a-71741165>.

888. Wiliarty, "How the Christian Democrats manage to adapt", 142.

889. Wiliarty, "The CDU/CSU and the 2021 federal election", 93.

890. Paul Kirby and Kristina Volk, "German politics froze out the far right for years – is this about to change?", BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy9dl4drr8lo> (2025).

891. Tobias Buck, "Eastern Germany on the brink of demographic collapse", *Financial Times*, 9 June 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/05baa6ae-86dd-11e9-a028-86cea8523dc2>.

892. Deutsche Welle, "How Germany's enduring East-West divide is pushing voters to the fringes", <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250224-how-germany-enduring-east-west-divide-pushing-voters-to-fringes-elections-afd-die-linke-migration> (2025).

Chapter Seven: The centre-right in Ireland

Having examined the principles, history and challenges of the German centre-right, this Chapter will turn to Ireland, identifying the character of the Irish centre-right and exploring what gave it such strength through its history before then assessing the challenges that have threatened its dominance in recent decades.

Of all the centre-right traditions across major European nations, Ireland provides the strongest example of electoral dominance. Centre-right parties have led every Irish government since Ireland won its independence in 1921. However, this dominance has come under threat in recent decades, with declining vote shares leaving the Irish centre-right's hold on power weaker than ever before.

What is the Irish centre-right?

Parties and traditions

Since 1921, Irish politics has been dominated by competition between two major centre-right parties: Fianna Fáil⁸⁹³ and Fine Gael.⁸⁹⁴ Given their ambitions for broad, cross-class appeal, the term 'centre-right' is

893. Fianna Fáil: Warriors of Fál. The word 'Fál' is a legendary name for Ireland. As such this name evokes both Irish mythology and a sense of national purpose. It is sometimes also translated as 'Soldiers of Destiny'. Certain Irish words and names, including Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, have entered vernacular English. To denote this, these terms are left unitalicised. All other Irish names and phrases used in this chapter are italicised, with translations provided in the footnotes.

894. Fine Gael: Family of the Irish. The term 'Fine' means tribe, family, or kin group, while 'Gael' refers to the Irish people.

a label that these parties have rarely claimed for themselves. Indeed, Fianna Fáil brands itself as “a national movement,” while Fine Gael describes itself as “a party of the progressive centre”.⁸⁹⁵ However, these parties’ socially conservative, Catholic roots and shared embrace of economic liberalism since the sixties firmly place them within the European centre-right as defined in Chapter Two. The Irish centre-right is therefore represented by these two competing parties, setting it apart from other European countries such as the UK and Germany, which have a single dominant centre-right party, and France, which has had a range of different centre-right parties.

Though they may have originated from different forms of nationalism that go back centuries – a violent Gaelic nationalism versus a constitutional nationalism – Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael’s proximate origins lie in their split over the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty.⁸⁹⁶ This agreement ended Ireland’s war of independence from the UK and made it a self-governing dominion of the British Empire – to be referred to as the Irish Free State – while offering an opt-out clause for the Protestant-dominated counties of Northern Ireland. Division over the terms of this Treaty sparked the Irish Civil War in June 1922 between supporters, who viewed the agreement as a pragmatic stepping-stone towards full Irish independence, and its opponents, who called for the establishment of a fully independent Ireland immediately and resented the Treaty’s requirement for an oath of allegiance to the British Crown. While fighting ended in 1923, political divisions persisted, with Fine Gael – known as *Cumann na nGaedheal*⁸⁹⁷ until 1933 – representing the victorious pro-Treaty side, and Fianna Fáil – founded in 1926 – representing the defeated anti-Treaty elements. While those historical roots have gradually faded in political relevance, patterns of electoral

895. “Our Values”, Fine Gael, <https://www.finegael.ie/the-party/our-values/> (2025); “Our Values”, Fianna Fáil: The Republican Party, <https://www.fiannafail.ie/our-values> (2025).

896. Kevin Byrne and Eoin O’Malley, “Politics with Hidden Bases: Unearthing the Deep Roots of Party Systems”, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 14,4 (2012), 613-629.

897. *Cumann na nGaedheal*: Society of the Gaels. The term ‘cumann’ means club, society or association, and ‘na nGaedheal’ means ‘of the Gaels’ (the Irish people).

support followed these historical lines of division for generations and persist to the present through the role of family in deciding and passing on party allegiance.⁸⁹⁸

Of these two centre-right parties, Fianna Fáil is historically the more dominant. It held office for 62 of the 80 years between 1932 and 2011 and is currently Ireland's largest party.⁸⁹⁹ In the most recent Irish general election in November 2024, Fianna Fáil won 48 *Teachtaí Dála*⁹⁰⁰ (TDs) out of a possible 174 in the Dáil Éireann⁹⁰¹ (from now on just Dáil), the principal chamber of the *Oireachtas*.⁹⁰²

Fine Gael, meanwhile, has historically played second fiddle in Irish politics. It has been the main party of government for all years when Fianna Fáil has been out of office. However, Fine Gael currently sits as the third largest party in the Dáil with 38 TDs, behind the left-wing Irish nationalist party Sinn Féin,⁹⁰³ which has 39.

Beyond their initial civil war divisions, these parties also maintain some other meaningful differences. First, the parties differ slightly in terms of traditional support base. Fianna Fáil has historically maintained greater support among the working and lower-middle classes, as opposed to Fine Gael, which has typically maintained a closer association with the middle classes.⁹⁰⁴ The 1981 election, for instance, saw the professional and managerial classes split 46% to 34% between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, and large farmers similarly split 53% to 35%.⁹⁰⁵ Meanwhile, this relationship was inverted among unskilled manual workers, where Fianna Fáil dominated, winning 45% of the

898. Steve Garner, "Ireland and immigration: explaining the absence of the far right", *Patterns of Prejudice*, 41.2 (2007), 109-130 (109).

899. Eoin O'Malley and Sean McGraw, "Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity", *Irish Political Studies*, 32.1 (2017), 1-29 (1-2).

900. Teachtaí Dála: Deputies of the Dáil. Elected members of the Dáil Éireann. The singular is "Teachta Dála" (TD); the plural is "Teachtaí Dála."

901. Dáil Éireann: Assembly of Ireland. The lower house and principal chamber of the Oireachtas.

902. Oireachtas: The bicameral parliament of Ireland.

903. Sinn Féin: We Ourselves. Also translated as 'Ourselves Alone', this term became a slogan for Irish independence from British rule in the early twentieth century and reflects the party's original ethos of Irish nationalism and self-determination.

904. Chris Ó Rálaigh, "The Forthcoming General Election in the Republic of Ireland: Winds of (Left-Wing) Change or Plus Ça Change?", *The Political Quarterly*, 96.1 (2024), 180-188 (181).

905. Michael Laver, "Are Irish Parties Peculiar?", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 79 (1992), 359-381 (361).

vote to Fine Gael's 24%.⁹⁰⁶ Even so, this distinction is not set in stone. In the 1969 election, for example, Fianna Fáil won 53% support among small farmers and 43% among unskilled manual workers, but also managed 37% support among professional and managerial classes; the same level as achieved by Fine Gael.⁹⁰⁷

Second, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have traditionally differed slightly on economic policy. While the parties' political pragmatism means that their stances have evolved significantly over the years – as explained below – Fianna Fáil has tended to be slightly more readily accepting of the state's role in solving public policy problems, whereas Fine Gael has typically shown slightly more of a preference for market-based solutions.⁹⁰⁸

Some further nuances separating Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are unpacked in this Chapter's next section on the core tenets of the Irish centre-right. However, generally speaking, it is important to note that these two political parties have historically been remarkably similar in their policy prospectus. Indeed, in the eighties, political scientist Kenneth Carty described them as “programmatically indistinguishable”.⁹⁰⁹ The proximity of the two parties has recently been evidenced by the ease with which these traditional opponents have formed governing coalitions. Such partnerships have been the product of the last two Irish general elections, in 2020 and 2024. Indeed, declining combined vote shares on the Irish centre-right – dropping from almost 70% in 2007 to just 43% in 2024 – have seen the prospect of a Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael merger raised regularly in the Irish media in the past decade.⁹¹⁰ However, as explained in Box 7.1, this eventuality remains unlikely.

906. Ibid.

907. Ibid.

908. O'Malley and McGraw, “Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity”, 12.

909. R. Kenneth Carty, *Party and Parish Pump: Electoral Politics in Ireland* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1981), 85.

910. For example see: Barry Roche, “Bertie Ahern: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael may merge due to lack of distinct policies”, *The Irish Times*, 28 October 2022, <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2022/10/28/bertie-ahern-fianna-fail-and-fine-gael-may-merge-due-to-lack-of-distinct-policies/>.

Box 7.1. Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael cooperation

In order to maintain power despite declining vote shares, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been obliged to form a series of pragmatic partnerships over the last three electoral cycles. In 2016, the two parties formed a confidence and supply arrangement in order to prop up Fine Gael's minority government. In the landmark election of 2020 – when Sinn Féin became the most popular party with 25% of the vote⁹¹¹ – a fact which caused Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to build a coalition alongside the Green Party, in a move long considered the Rubicon of Irish politics.⁹¹² A similar situation arose following the 2024 election when neither centre-right party won sufficient seats to form a workable majority independent of the other, this time opting to form a coalition alongside the Regional Independent Group.

This visible alignment over the past decade has opened both parties up to increased criticism. In the 2010s, Sinn Féin was able to gain anti-establishment support by using the semi-derogatory label 'FFG' to criticise Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael as “two sides of the same elite coin” with Sinn Féin representing the opposite pole.⁹¹³ Disillusioned voters are now increasingly likely to leave the centre-right altogether and this effect would only be strengthened by a potential union of the two parties. Indeed, former Fine Gael leader Leo Varadkar – who served as taoiseach⁹¹⁴ from 2017 to 2020 and again from 2022 to 2024 – suggested last year that, while Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are increasingly

911. “Election 2020: Results Hub”, *The Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/election2020/results-hub> (2020).
912. Duncan McDonnell, “The Republic of Ireland: The Dog That Hasn't Barked in the Night?”, in Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (eds.), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (Basingstone: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 198-216 (202).

913. Eoin O'Malley, “Ireland After the 2024 EP Elections: The Centre Holds ... Just About”, in Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina (eds.) *2024 EP Elections under the Shadow of Rising Populism*, European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS) (2024) 220-233 (222-23).

914. Taoiseach: Head of government or prime minister of Ireland.

becoming ‘sister parties,’ a merger is unlikely due to the perceived risk that this fusion might result in a product that is less than the sum of its parts.⁹¹⁵ As such, it is likely that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael retain a semblance of division in order to maintain broader support for both centre-right parties through perceived competition.

Lastly, it is worth noting that, in 1985, Ireland saw the brief appearance of an alternative centre-right party: the Progressive Democrats (PDs). Consisting primarily of former Fianna Fáil politicians, the party adopted more secular and liberal positions on social issues such as divorce and advocated for greater economic liberalisation. However, despite winning 14 seats and 12% of the vote in 1987 – thus becoming the third largest party – it struggled to make headway in the face of economic consensus between the two main parties.⁹¹⁶ While the PDs regularly featured in governing coalitions, they saw declining vote shares until their eventual dissolution in 2009. This Chapter therefore mentions the PDs as part of the centre-right where relevant, but focuses its attention on Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael as the primary representatives of the Irish centre-right.

Tenets of the Irish centre-right

Having identified the key representatives of the Irish centre-right, we can now explain the tenets that have defined these parties over the past century. This Chapter will outline four such core tenets: pragmatism, commitment to Irish national identity, social conservatism, and economic liberalism.

915. Mairead Maguire, “Varadkar: Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil ‘rapidly becoming sister parties’ but merger not likely”, *The Journal*, 17 July 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/varadkar-fine-gael-and-fianna-fail-rapidly-becoming-sister-parties-but-merger-not-likely-6439153-Jul2024/>.

916. Liam Weeks, “Parties and the party system”, in John Coakley and Michael Gallagher (eds.), *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, 5th edn (London: Routledge, 2009), 139–63 (141).

Pragmatism

Our first tenet, pragmatism, refers to the Irish centre-right's strong track record of maintaining political effectiveness by carefully adapting its policy prospectus over time. Beyond the simple desire to retain electability, this tenet ties into the European centre-right principle of conservatism, with both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael advocating consistently demonstrating their willingness to undergo moderate reform in order to preserve longer-term national stability and growth.

This tenet is embodied particularly by Fianna Fáil, whose ability to consistently adapt its character and ambitions has been central to both its electoral dominance and its effectiveness as a party of government.⁹¹⁷ This flexibility is apparent in the evolution of the party's economic policy. For example, upon recognising the shortcomings of its protectionist stance in the fifties, Fianna Fáil was able to smoothly transition to achieving an economically liberal free trade model in the sixties without, in the meantime, leaving power. Indeed, Seán Lemass, having designed Fianna Fáil's protectionist policy of import-substituting industrialisation (ISI) as Minister for Industry and Commerce in 1932, later became a key proponent of dismantling it as taoiseach in 1959, having recognised that the Ireland's domestic market was too small for this system of tariffs and import quotas to work effectively.⁹¹⁸

Likewise, Fianna Fáil's pragmatism was demonstrated by the party's relationship with the Catholic Church in Ireland when handling social and moral issues, particularly in the mid-twentieth century. One prominent example was the national crisis sparked in 1951 by the Mother and Child Scheme – a Fianna Fáil policy designed to provide free healthcare for mothers and children until age 16.⁹¹⁹ When this policy was taken forward by the incumbent Fine Gael-led coalition

917. Eoin O'Malley and R. Kenneth Carty, "A Conservative Revolution? The Disequilibrium of Irish Politics", in Michael Marsh et al. (eds.), *A Conservative Revolution?: Electoral Change in Twenty-first-century Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 208-222 (215).

918. Cormac Ó Gráda and Kevin Hjortshøj O'Rourke, "The Irish economy during the century after partition", *The Economic History Review*, 75 (2022), 336-70 (351-55).

919. O'Malley and McGraw, "Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity", 23.

government – elected in 1948 – the scheme faced strong opposition from the Church over the potential for state interference in family life. Rather than breaking its close relationship with the Church – discussed later in this Chapter – Fianna Fáil moderated its position and consulted privately with bishops. It therefore set itself up to implement similar legislation once it had returned to office in June 1951 – this coming in the form of the 1953 Health Act. Although Fianna Fáil exercised a notable degree of opportunism during this period – using this crisis to help bring down the Fine Gael government – its ability to mitigate Church opposition is evidence of how pragmatism has helped the party to drive through positive moderate reforms in the long run.

While less effective in this respect than Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael has proven similarly pragmatic in its ability to adapt its policy prospectus. For example, despite being the less statist of the two centre-right parties, Fine Gael opened up to more interventionist measures in the interests of stability during its periods of coalition with the centre-left Labour Party through the twentieth century. This was the case under the Fine Gael-led government of 1948-1951, which presided over a ten-fold increase in social housing construction from 744 units in 1947 to 7,000 in 1951.⁹²⁰ This same pragmatism came to the fore in the late seventies and eighties under the leadership of Garret FitzGerald, who was able to compete with Fianna Fáil over the course of three elections in 1981 and 1982 by moderating Fine Gael's social conservatism in line with rapidly changing public attitudes – a development explored in greater detail later in this Chapter.

However, it is worth noting that this pragmatism, while electorally effective in the long run, is beginning to cause some problems for the Irish centre-right. As explored below, Ireland's electoral landscape has become much more crowded since the eighties. As such, centre-right dominance can no longer be taken for granted, and it is becoming

920. "Our History: Government – Triumph and Trials", The Labour Party, <https://labour.ie/about/our-history/government-triumph-and-trials/> (2025).

increasingly important to defend a more defined political identity. Indeed, in 2020, Leo Varadkar correctly identified that Fine Gael can no longer define itself by “simply not being Fianna Fáil,” and the same is true in the opposite direction.⁹²¹ This issue of party identity is unpacked at length later in this Chapter.

Commitment to Irish national identity

Our second defining tenet of the Irish centre-right is a commitment to maintaining a strong sense of Irish national identity, consistent with the non-cosmopolitanism characteristic of the centre-right across Europe.

While common to most European centre-right traditions, this tenet holds a particular importance in an Irish context given the nation's history. The relative recency of the independence struggle – coming after 700 years of Anglo-Norman, English or British rule – means that the population remains closely shaped by the cultural memory of invasion and external domination. The desire to maintain a strong, independent Ireland is therefore a significant force even in modern Irish politics.

This factor is given added significance by the persistent question of unification with the six Northern Irish counties that remain part of the United Kingdom. The relative urgency of this ambition has evolved over the course of the past century and, since the nineties, the cause of Irish unification has been more closely associated with Sinn Féin than either of the mainstream centre-right parties. However, the long-term aim of building a united Ireland has been a core principle for both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael throughout their history.

There are some differences between the two parties on this tenet. Dating back to its anti-Treaty heritage, Fianna Fáil has typically represented a more explicit brand of Irish nationalism. Indeed, the

921. Stephen Collins and Ciara Meehan, *Saving the state: Fine Gael from Collins to Varadkar* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2020), 418.

political scientists Eoin O'Malley and Sean McGraw stress how Fianna Fáil has always sought to be “a national movement” rather than “a mere party”.⁹²² Fine Gael, on the other hand, represents a slightly more internationalist outlook as reflected by the fact that it defines itself, amongst other things, as “a party of Europe”.⁹²³ Nevertheless, Irish nationalism remains an important element of Fine Gael's identity. In its early years, it was commonly known as ‘Fine Gael – The United Ireland Party’, and its full constitutional name remains Fine Gael (United Ireland).

The streak of nationalism within Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael places them closer to the secular conservatives of the UK and France than the Christian Democrats of countries including Germany, Spain, Belgium or Switzerland.⁹²⁴ However, it is important to stress that both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are strongly committed to membership of the European Union, viewing the EU as an extension of national interest rather than limit on it.⁹²⁵ Indeed, it was Fianna Fáil that led Ireland's entry into the European Communities in 1973. O'Malley and McGraw stress the significance of the fact that Fianna Fáil could portray entry as “a natural progression of their inherent patriotism” framing this move through economic terms as “the patriotic endeavour of doing what was best for the country.”⁹²⁶

This balance has allowed Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to effectively appeal to feelings of Irish national pride. Both have effectively navigated the tension between internationalist and nationalist tendencies, avoiding narrow definitions of Irishness and maintaining an inclusive and civic approach to national identity while still emphasising the importance of Irish identity and cultural heritage, as explored in detail later in this Chapter.

922. O'Malley and McGraw, “Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity”, 2.

923. “Our Values”, Fine Gael, <https://www.finegael.ie/the-party/our-values/> (2025).

924. Weeks, “Parties and the party system”, 142.

925. O'Malley, “Ireland After the 2024 EP Elections”, 222.

926. O'Malley and McGraw, “Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity”, 16.

Social conservatism

Our third tenet, social conservatism, refers to the traditional, Catholic values of the Irish centre-right. This religiosity is a form of conservatism, a key principle of the European centre-right.

Ireland's population has been overwhelmingly Roman Catholic for much of the last century, with this majority only dropping below 90% for the first time in 2002.⁹²⁷ Given this late process of secularisation, the Catholic Church has represented one of the most important social and political actors in Ireland for much of the last century.⁹²⁸ It is therefore unsurprising that a socially conservative outlook has characterised both centre-right parties through their development.

Fianna Fáil, in particular, owed much of its electoral appeal – at least in the twentieth century – to its ability to mobilise the influence and prestige of the Roman Catholic Church.⁹²⁹ As such, while Fianna Fáil was eager to maintain support among the parts of Irish society developing more progressive views on topics such as divorce and abortion, the party's close relationship with the Church – and hence its need to defend Church interests – acted as a conservative brake on any such tendencies.⁹³⁰ This prioritisation of Church doctrine is evidenced by the fact that Fianna Fáil maintained support for the ban on the sale of contraceptives throughout the fifties and sixties, with the liberalisation process only beginning via a court case in 1973.

While less intimately connected with the Church, Fine Gael also maintained a staunchly Catholic outlook on social issues for much of its history, aligning with Fianna Fáil on subjects such as contraception.⁹³¹ Further, Fine Gael has an added degree of institutional conservatism, viewing itself as the party of law and order. This sentiment dates back to the party's legacy on the victorious pro-Treaty side of the Civil War

927. Central Statistics Office (CSO), "Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion", <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rrc/#:~:text=In%202016%20Roman%20Catholics%20accounted,0> (2016).

928. O'Malley and McGraw, "Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity", 20.

929. Ibid.

930. Ibid.

931. Collins and Meehan, *Saving the state*, vii.

and its role in establishing the institutions of state.⁹³²

Despite the traditionally conservative outlooks detailed above, both parties have shown a notable degree of flexibility in this area over the last five decades. For example, in the seventies and eighties, Fine Gael responded to increased electoral competition from socially progressive parties such as the PDs by taking a socially liberal turn, repositioning the party to the left of Fianna Fáil on social issues such as divorce and contraception.⁹³³ However, this balancing act is becoming increasingly challenging in recent decades as the gulf between Irish conservatives and progressives widens – a factor explored in this Chapter's final section.⁹³⁴

Economic liberalism

This Chapter's final tenet, economic liberalism, aligns with the European centre-right principle of the same name outlined in Chapter Two – namely the belief that the economy is best served by a pro-market model that is largely free of government control.

This tenet, or at least a variation of it, has played a central, long-term role in the history of the centre-right in each of the countries studied in this report so far. However, economic liberalism has a slightly different history within the Irish centre-right, with consensus around this tenet only developing since the late fifties. While the specific details of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's economic policies will be discussed later in the Chapter, it is worth outlining this tenet's long-term evolution here.

In the first three decades after independence, economic liberalism acted as a dividing line, rather than a unifying tenet of the Irish centre-right. Since its inception, *Cumann na nGaedheal* – and later Fine Gael – has adhered to a recognisably liberal economic model. When the party gained power in 1923 it demonstrated this through a programme of fiscal responsibility, low taxes, and minimal government borrowing.⁹³⁵

932. Ibid, viii.

933. Weeks, "Parties and the party system", 141.

934. O'Malley and McGraw, "Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity", 24.

935. Frank Barry, "A reappraisal of Cumann na nGaedheal economic policy", *Irish Political Studies*, 39.2 (2024), 139-161.

In contrast, Fianna Fáil's early years were defined by a much more statist economic prospectus. The party's Gaelic nationalism translated into economic nationalism, which saw it advocate and later implement a protectionist programme aiming to boost native industry and Irish self-sufficiency through tariffs and quotas.⁹³⁶

However, decades of economic underperformance came to a head in a macroeconomic crisis in 1955-56 which prompted Fianna Fáil to re-evaluate its policy position.⁹³⁷ The late fifties and sixties therefore represent a turning point, with the beginning of consensus building around an economically liberal model on the Irish centre-right. This notably involved the end of the protectionist experiment, and the advent of a more outward looking economic policy – cemented in particular by Ireland's entry into the European Communities (EC) in 1973. Both parties supported this liberalising economic shift. However, their fiscal conservatism left much to be desired, with both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments inclined to finance current expenditure through unsustainable levels of overseas borrowing, particularly during the economic downturn of the seventies.⁹³⁸

This changed from 1987 onwards as Ireland's 20-year period of exceptional growth – known as the 'Celtic Tiger' – saw the further development of centre-right liberal economic consensus built on fiscal responsibility and a low-tax regime designed to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). However, it is important to note that this consensus, while economically liberal, differed significantly from British and American economically liberal models employed at the time. The Irish centre-right's formula for growth featured a significant level of state involvement through its use of 'social partnerships' – a system of triennial agreements negotiated between the government, employers

936. Kevin O'Rourke, "Burn Everything British but Their Coal!: The Anglo-Irish Economic War of the 1930s", *The Journal of Economic History*, 51.2 (1991), 357-366.

937. Patrick Honohan and Cormac Ó Gráda, "The Irish Macroeconomic Crisis of 1955-56: How much was due to monetary policy?", *Irish Economic and Social History*, XXV (1998), 52-80.

938. Ó Gráda and O'Rourke, "The Irish economy during the century after partition", 354.

and unions to balance wage restraint with tax cuts.⁹³⁹

The social partnership system has since fallen out of use – its long-term weakness having been exacerbated by the economic challenges of the 2008 global financial crisis.⁹⁴⁰ However, it is important to note that the Irish centre-right's economically liberal model retains elements of this statist dimension. This is evidenced in recent Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael coalitions' tendency to combat inequality through redistributive policy rather than market mechanisms – a practice that has become increasingly prevalent through the use of lump sum payments to help with the cost of living since 2021.⁹⁴¹

History of the Irish centre-right

Having outlined the core tenets of the Irish centre-right, we now outline its history, exploring how these tenets have translated into the policy prospectus of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael at different points in time. Before we begin, two points are worth noting.

First, while significant in consolidating Irish sovereignty and defining its internationally neutral stance, the Second World War was far less impactful on Irish politics than in the other nations studied in this report. This Chapter's overview of centre-right history therefore starts slightly earlier than is the case for the other countries in this report, beginning with the general election of August 1923 which marks a more logical jumping-off point as the first election since the establishment of the Irish Free State in December 1922 and following closely after the end of the Irish Civil War in May 1923.

Second, the history of the Irish centre-right is remarkable in that a centre-right party has led every successive government in the state's

939. Kwon Hyeong-ki, "The Irish Social Partnership Model: From Growth Promotion to Crisis Management?", in Chang Kyung-Sup et al. (eds.), *Developmental Politics in Transition: The Neoliberal Era and Beyond* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 254-273.

940. Michael Doherty, "It Must Have Been Love...But It's Over Now: The Crisis and Collapse of Social Partnership in Ireland", *Transfer European Review of Labour and Research*, 17.3 (2011), 371-385.

941. For example, see: Aidan Regan, "How Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael spent like the left to stay in power", *Business Post*, 8 December 2024, <https://www.businesspost.ie/analysis-opinion/aidan-regan-how-fianna-fail-and-fine-gael-spent-like-the-left-to-stay-in-power/>.

modern history, either in a governing majority or as the dominant party in a coalition. For the majority of the period studied, electoral competition for the Irish centre-right has therefore been essentially internal, rather than against external opponents, given the distinct lack of a strong centre-left alternative as seen elsewhere in Europe. An overview of this state of affairs, which became known as the ‘two-and-a-half party system,’ is given in Box 7.2.

Box 7.2. Ireland’s two-and-a-half party system

Following an initial decade of Fine Gael dominance immediately after independence, the nation settled into an electoral status quo that saw Fianna Fáil finish first and Fine Gael second in every subsequent election until 2011. The stability of this system saw the establishment of what became known as the ‘two-and-a-half party system,’ where each government was dominated by one of the two major centre-right parties, with the ‘half’ representing the Labour Party which would often support Fine Gael governments as a junior coalition partner – as happened five times between the 1932 and 1982.⁹⁴² This system began to change in the eighties as high unemployment, high emigration and economic stagnation undermined confidence in the traditional centre-right parties, contributing to the emergence of new smaller parties – in the form of the PDs and Greens – which soon turned into potential coalition partners. The two-and-a-half party system finally collapsed in 2011 when the effects of the 2008 global financial crash saw Fianna Fáil drop below the Labour Party, the first time either party had fallen into an electoral third place.

942. Conor Little and David M. Farrell, “The Party System: At a Critical Juncture”, in David M. Farrell and Niamh Hardiman (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Irish Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) 521-538 (521-522).

This form of electoral dominance was unique in Europe due to a distinct lack of a powerful centre-left party. Indeed, in 1992, political scientist Peter Mair observed the “striking electoral debility” of such parties in Ireland, where their combined support had never yet exceeded 15%.⁹⁴³ Social class played a role in distinguishing the support bases of Fianna Fáil from Fine Gael, but had very little role defining their policy. Competition between these similar centre-right parties with heterogenous yet stable support bases and very similar policy programmes led to remarkable and long-lasting centre-right dominance. Until the nineties, the two centre-right parties continued to gather around 80% of the popular vote, dropping to around 70% in the nineties and noughties; in contrast, in the rest of Europe, centre-right support averaged around 40% throughout this period.⁹⁴⁴

State-building and conservative consolidation, 1923-1932

Following victory in the 1923 general election with 63 of the Dáil's 153 seats, *Cumann na nGaedheal* – the forerunner of Fine Gael – led Ireland's first decade post-independence with two minority governments. Under the leadership of Taoiseach William Thomas Cosgrave, the party embodied all the core tenets of the Irish centre-right. *Cumann na nGaedheal* in that period was marked by a social conservatism that was heavily influenced by the Catholic Church. This is evident in measures such as the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, which prohibited the sale and distribution of literature deemed ‘unwholesome,’ including works advocating contraception or abortion.⁹⁴⁵ Economically, *Cumann na nGaedheal* pursued an economically liberal agenda, prioritising fiscal stability through low taxation, balanced budgets and a strict aversion to borrowing. For example, the *Cumann na nGaedheal* Government

943. Peter Mair, “Explaining the absence of class politics in Ireland”, in John Goldthorpe and Christopher Whelan (eds.), *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 383-410 (384-85).

944. Ibid; Weeks, “Parties and the party system”, 143.

945. “Censorship of Publications Act, 1929”, Irish Statute Book, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1929/act/21/enacted/en/print> (1929).

reduced the standard rate of income tax from 25% to 15% in 1927.⁹⁴⁶

The party's most significant trait during this period, however, was its pragmatism. *Cumann na nGaedheal* faced the dual challenge of consolidating the stability of the new state while responding to the persistent demands of unsatisfied nationalism from anti-Treaty elements.⁹⁴⁷ In response, the party implemented distinctive policies to promote national identity such as major reforms to reintroduce the Irish language into the education system, notably making Irish an essential subject for student teachers in 1922.⁹⁴⁸ Yet, this emphasis on national identity was tempered by a recognition of economic realities, particularly the close level of integration between the British and Irish economies. The introduction of the Irish pound in 1928 – pegged one-to-one with the pound sterling and fully backed by a pound sterling reserve – exemplified *Cumann na nGaedheal*'s pragmatic response to this reality. While this decision constrained fiscal policy, it protected the new Irish currency from inflation and reassured commercial and banking interests.⁹⁴⁹

During this era, *Fianna Fáil* emerged as a significant force under Éamon de Valera, formally establishing itself as a party in 1926. In opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty, *Fianna Fáil* criticised *Cumann na nGaedheal* for its perceived dependence on the UK and advocated for greater economic self-sufficiency.⁹⁵⁰ The party's vision was distinctly more protectionist and interventionist – a programme it began to implement after winning power in the 1932 general election, securing 72 seats to *Cumann na nGaedheal*'s 57.

946. Killian Carroll, "Free State to Tax State: A Century of Taxation in Ireland", *The Economic and Social Review*, 53.1 (2022), 41-85 (56-58).

947. Mel Farrell, *Party Politics in a New Democracy: The Irish Free State 1922-37* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 102.

948. Brendan Walsh, "Schooling, the Gaelic League, and the Irish language revival in Ireland 1831-1922", *International Journal of the History of Education*, 59.6 (2023), 1161-77 (1174).

949. Frank Barry, "A reappraisal of *Cumann na nGaedheal* economic policy", *Irish Political Studies*, 39.2 (2024), 139-61 (145).

950. O'Malley and McGraw, "Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity", 14.

Economic nationalism, 1932-1958

In the three decades that followed, a number of policy developments focused on the defence of Irish national identity. This shift was manifested above all through Fianna Fáil's strident economic nationalism.

This stance was opposed by Fine Gael, who, in this period, managed two stints in government in coalition with Labour – between 1948 and 1951, and again between 1954 and 1957. However, Fianna Fáil dominated this period, holding office for 20 of its 26 years, and was thus able to set a clear protectionist direction for Ireland's economic policies throughout this time. Under the leadership of Éamon de Valera, Fianna Fáil aimed to secure Ireland's self-sufficiency through import-substitution industrialisation (ISI). This involved a system of tariffs and import quotas – beginning with the 1932 Emergency Imposition of Duties Act – designed to foster the growth of Irish industries and reduce Ireland's dependence on imports, particularly from Britain. This approach also included greater state intervention to foster indigenous companies, including the Irish Sugar Company and Aer Lingus, and restrictions on FDI from entering domestic markets.⁹⁵¹

This approach had some limited positive impacts. Irish economist Kevin O'Rourke, for example, argues that despite triggering a six-year period of retaliatory tariffs with the UK known as the 'Economic War', the 3% loss in GNP – valued at roughly £31.5 million – was outweighed by Irish gains made in the 1938 settlement which ended this dispute on terms favourable to Ireland. Notably, this agreement allowed Ireland to settle the controversial issue of land annuities – loans made to Irish farmers by the UK exchequer in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – with a single £10 million lump sum, despite the fact that the annuities represented a £100 million liability at the time.⁹⁵²

951. Y.A. Wei and V.N. Balasubramanyam (eds.), *Foreign Direct Investment: Six Country Case Studies* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2004) 166.

952. O'Rourke, "Burn Everything British but Their Coal: The Anglo-Irish Economic War of the 1930s", 366.

Nevertheless, despite these specific upsides, this nationalistic economic policy was widely recognised as a resounding failure which hindered rather than helped Irish economic growth.⁹⁵³ Indeed, between 1950 and 1960, Irish per capita GDP growth was just 2.2%.⁹⁵⁴ While comparable to the UK, this figure was far below rates seen in other European nations such as France, Spain and Germany that had per capita GDP growth of 3.6%, 3.8% and 7.1% respectively across the same period. Instead of building a growing, self-sufficient economy, *Fianna Fáil's* protectionism generated an overly sheltered, inefficient manufacturing sector whose weakness is illustrated by the fact that virtually none of the new state-sponsored firms survived the economic liberalisation of the sixties.⁹⁵⁵ The social impacts of this economic period became highly visible through emigration, as job shortages saw 60,000 people leaving Ireland every year between 1950 and 1960, a level not seen since the aftermath of the Great Famine (1845-1849).⁹⁵⁶

These economic problems came to a head in Ireland's macroeconomic crisis of 1955-56 when a failure to raise interest rates in line with the UK pushed Ireland's underperforming economy into a deep recession marked by harsh fiscal contraction. This event – described by Patrick Honohan, former Governor of the Central Bank of Ireland, as “the defining event of post-war Irish economic history” – prompted a frank reappraisal of economic policy in a liberal direction, thus ending Ireland's flirtation with economic nationalism.⁹⁵⁷

Economic liberalisation and social democracy, 1958-1987

From the late fifties through to the mid-eighties, control of Ireland's government changed hands multiple times. Fine Gael governed in coalition with Labour on three occasions – 1973-77, 1981-82 and 1982-

953. O'Malley and McGraw, “Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity”, 15.

954. Ó Gráda and O'Rourke, “The Irish economy during the century after partition”, 353

955. Ibid.

956. O'Malley and McGraw, “Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity”, 15.

957. Honohan and Ó Gráda, “The Irish Macroeconomic Crisis of 1955-56: How much was due to monetary policy?”, 52.

87 – with the intervening years governed by Fianna Fáil, including a nine-month minority government from March to December of 1982.

This period saw significant shifts in the policy prospectus of both centre-right parties, with both parties reaching a consensus around economic liberalism but diverging on social policy.

First, these decades marked a decisive shift towards a more open economic model. This transition began with Fianna Fáil's 1958 First Programme for Economic Expansion which officially abandoned the principles of protectionism and encouraged foreign investment through tax incentives and grants to foreign companies establishing operations in Ireland. This change was embodied by a switch in party leader from de Valera to Seán Lemass, who sought to promote Ireland as a modern, outward-looking European nation.⁹⁵⁸ His leadership brought a more pragmatic approach particularly to Ireland's trading relationship with the UK, including a lucrative free trade deal signed in 1965.⁹⁵⁹

These changes had a clear impact on Ireland's economic fortunes. Between 1960 and 1973, Ireland's per capita GDP grew at an average of 3.7% per year.⁹⁶⁰ While this was lower than other economies on the European periphery, such as Portugal or Greece – both of which averaged around 7% per capita growth per year – it was a major jump from Ireland's 2.2% average in the previous decade.⁹⁶¹

This process of economic liberalisation was supported by both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Indeed, Fianna Fáil's shift towards a more outward-looking economic approach was rooted in policy groundwork laid by Fine Gael's Gerard Sweetman – Minister for Finance in the 1954–1957 Fine Gael-Labour coalition – who had helped pave the way towards economic modernisation, for example by beginning Ireland's engagement with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in 1957. This consensus was further evidenced by both parties' support

958. O'Malley and McGraw, "Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity", 15.

959. "Removing Trade Restrictions", RTE Archives, [https://www.rte.ie/archives/2020/1126/1180689-anglo-irish-trade-pact/\(1965\)](https://www.rte.ie/archives/2020/1126/1180689-anglo-irish-trade-pact/(1965)).

960. Ó Gráda and O'Rourke, "The Irish economy during the century after partition", 354.

961. Ibid.

for Ireland's entry into the European Communities (EC) in 1973, joining alongside the UK and Denmark.

These changes in economic policy helped to lay the foundations for Ireland's future success. However, it is important to note that the latter half of this period was marked by economic problems. In the context of the 1973 oil crisis and the global recession that followed, both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-Labour governments opted for unsustainable deficit spending which failed to generate sufficient growth to support the heavy international borrowing that this approach entailed. This situation led to a prolonged recession – between 1980 and 1984 GDP shrank by almost 8% and between 1979 and 1986 unemployment increased from 7% to 17%.⁹⁶²

During this period, the pragmatism of the Irish centre-right was particularly tested under the tenure of the Fine Gael Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald who attempted to restore stability through an austerity programme of “fiscal rectitude,” despite being in coalition with the Labour party whose base was naturally opposed to this approach. Conscious efforts were made to appease Fine Gael's Labour partners by sheltering working people from cuts where possible. For example, the Government implemented a public service recruitment freeze in the mid-eighties which allowed for a reduction in public service numbers through attrition – workers leaving voluntarily over time – rather than forced redundancies.⁹⁶³ However, these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. The Fine Gael-Labour coalition collapsed in March 1982 after its budget was defeated by 82 votes to 81. Though the coalition regained power in December 1982 and lasted until January 1987, these years were marked by an ongoing stalemate on economic policy as the coalition partners failed to agree on the scale of necessary public

962. “Ireland GDP 1960-2025”, Macrotrends, [https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/irl/ireland/gdp-gross-domestic-product-\(2025\)](https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/irl/ireland/gdp-gross-domestic-product-(2025)); Ó Gráda and O'Rourke, “The Irish economy during the century after partition”, 356.

963. Garret FitzGerald, “Major task of cutting spending without hitting the less well-off”, *The Irish Times*, 12 July 2008, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/major-task-of-cutting-spending-without-hitting-the-less-well-off-1.94446>.

spending cuts. Decisive fiscal austerity would only begin in 1987 when Fianna Fáil returned to power under Taoiseach Charles Haughey.

While Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael maintained control during this period of economic stagnation in the eighties, it is worth noting that these years were also marked by fragmentation in the Irish political landscape, as explored in Box 7.3 below.

Box 7.3. Political fragmentation in eighties Ireland

During the economic difficulties of the eighties, political shifts began to undermine the Irish centre-right's long-held electoral dominance. Throughout this period, Irish politics became increasingly fragmented, with the two main centre-right parties' declining vote shares threatened by new, ideologically diverse parties. This included the far-left Workers' Party, which first won a seat in 1981; its moderate successor, the Democratic Left in 1992; the Green Party from 1989; and Sinn Féin from 1997.⁹⁶⁴ The electoral breakthrough of the Progressive Democrats (PDs) in 1987, albeit short-lived, also represented a splintering within the centre-right. The threat to the two dominant centre-right parties was emphasised by a clear drop in party loyalty: in the seventies, more than 60% of the population felt "close" to a party. This had dropped to less than 40% by the mid-nineties.⁹⁶⁵

The second important policy development of this era between 1958 and 1987 is a divergence within the Irish centre-right in terms of social policy. During its years in government, Fianna Fáil oversaw a significant expansion of Ireland's social welfare programs and the development of a more comprehensive social safety net. This included, in 1967, a major broadening of access to education. These changes extended free secondary education to all children up to age 18 and provided free

964. Little and Farrell, "The Party System: At a Critical Juncture", 521.

965. Michael Marsh, "The (Un)Changing Irish Voter", in David M. Farrell and Niamh Hardiman (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Irish Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 558-576 (560-61).

transport to school for children in rural areas.⁹⁶⁶ This shift demonstrated Fianna Fáil's pragmatism, demonstrating the party's realisation that the existing hands-off approach – leaving education predominantly under the independent control of the Catholic church – was limiting Ireland's development and international competitiveness.

However, towards the end of this period, Fine Gael began to differentiate itself from Fianna Fáil through a pragmatic moderation of its social conservatism in line with changing public attitudes. The pace of change during this period of Irish history is illustrated by a report by social psychologist Margret Fine-Davis made to the Joint *Oireachtas* Committee on Women's Rights in 1987. This report found that, while in 1975 70% of people surveyed agreed with the statement that "being a wife and mother are the most fulfilling roles any woman could want," only 39% did so in 1986.⁹⁶⁷

Fine Gael's transition, which included measures such as liberalising access to contraceptives under the 1985 Health (Family Planning) (Amendment) Act, marked a significant philosophical shift from the party's traditional Catholic conservatism. While the shift was not entirely successful – FitzGerald's 1986 referendum to legislate for civil divorce was defeated 63% to 37% – this change was nevertheless an important step in Fine Gael's modernisation process and demonstrates the party's pragmatism. Irish political scientist Liam Weeks describes how FitzGerald "conveyed the image of Fine Gael representing a new, modern and secular Ireland," compared to Fianna Fáil which maintained "a more traditional, conservative mindset".⁹⁶⁸

Lastly, it is worth briefly noting that this period also saw important developments regarding the Irish centre-right's commitment to Irish national identity. This tenet became particularly salient in the late sixties which marked the beginning of the Troubles – the violent

966. Brian Fleming et al., "Reflecting on 100 years of educational policy in Ireland: was equality ever a priority?", *Irish Educational Studies*, 41.3 (2022), 441-55 (442-444).

967. Margret Fine-Davis, "Changing gender role attitudes in Ireland: 1975-1986", http://archive.oireachtas.ie/1988/APPENDIX_31051988_1.html (1987)

968. Weeks, "Parties and the party system", 141.

sectarian conflict that broke out in Northern Ireland between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists after an escalation in tensions between the two communities. During the Troubles – which lasted until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement – the question of Northern Ireland became even more closely intertwined with Irish nationalism, forcing both centre-right parties to adopt practical positions in response to the rapidly evolving conflict.⁹⁶⁹

This is another area where Fine Gael exemplifies the Irish centre-right's effective political pragmatism. Fine Gael's more moderate views on the conflict were less in tune with the national mood than the openly nationalist stance of Fianna Fáil.⁹⁷⁰ However, the latter's rhetoric was proving unproductive in resolving the conflict through negotiations with counterparts in the United Kingdom. In contrast, the FitzGerald government of 1982-87 was able to make progress on this issue by working constructively with the UK while simultaneously appealing to stronger nationalist elements through initiatives such as the New Ireland Forum – a participative assembly of representatives from Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party and the Northern Irish Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP). The Forum met over 40 times between 1983 and 1984 and established a level of consensus on the nationalist side of the debate.⁹⁷¹ While all three of the Forum's proposed solutions were quickly dismissed by UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the consensus that it produced helped to pave the way for the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. This agreement was a crucial step in building the cooperative relationship between the UK and Ireland which would prove central to the later Good Friday Agreement, which remains in force to this day, even if with difficulties.

969. Susan McDermott, "Analysing the development of bipartisanship in the Dáil: the interaction of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil party politics on the Irish government policy on Northern Ireland", Institute for British-Irish Studies – University College Dublin, <https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/entities/publication/dfa617be-0b07-48dc-9948-79e8d44664f6> (2009), 3.

970. *Ibid.*, 6.

971. Séan Ó Duibhir, "Did the New Ireland Forum play a part in the peace process?", RTÉ, 12 August 2021, <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2021/0812/1240482-new-ireland-forum-garret-fitzgerald-sdip-margaret-thatcher-out-out-out/>.

Economic liberalism and the Celtic Tiger, 1987-2008

The late eighties to late noughties was another era where Irish politics was dominated by Fianna Fáil. Aside from a brief window of Fine Gael-led coalition from 1994 to 1997, Fianna Fáil held power throughout this period in a series of minority and coalition governments, often supported by the centre-right Progressive Democrats (PDs). These years were defined above all else by Ireland's transition from decades of economic under-performance to becoming one of the world's fastest growing economies.⁹⁷² During this period Ireland was known as the 'Celtic Tiger'; it saw Ireland's economy grow by 229% between 1987 and 2007.⁹⁷³

During this period, centre-right governments implemented a wide array of economically liberal policies to restore stability and boost Ireland's growth. At the heart of these changes was Fianna Fáil Taoiseach Charles Haughey's programme of fiscal consolidation, delivered on a scale that Fitzgerald had failed to achieve with his Fine Gael-Labour coalition. By 1987, Irish debt had reached almost 112% of GDP, one of the highest levels in Europe.⁹⁷⁴ Upon forming a minority government in March 1987, Haughey implemented drastic reductions in government spending to stabilise public finances, including the amalgamation or closure of state agencies. Total cuts made through the budget and spending reviews in 1987 amounted to almost £500 million (IEP),⁹⁷⁵ equivalent to nearly 6% of pre-budget estimates for the year's total public current expenditure.⁹⁷⁶ Alongside these spending

972. Ó Gráda and O'Rourke, "The Irish economy during the century after partition", 356.

973. Katelyn Peters, "Celtic Tiger: Definition, History, and How Irish Economy Thrived", Investopedia, [https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/celtictiger.asp#:~:text=Key%20Takeaways=Celtic%20Tiger%20is%20a%20nickname%20for%20Ireland%20during%20its%20boom,Ireland's%20GDP%20grew%20by%20229%25\(2024\)](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/celtictiger.asp#:~:text=Key%20Takeaways=Celtic%20Tiger%20is%20a%20nickname%20for%20Ireland%20during%20its%20boom,Ireland's%20GDP%20grew%20by%20229%25(2024)).

974. Robert Hagemann, "Fiscal Rules for Ireland", Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, <https://fiscalcouncil.ie/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Fiscal-Rules-for-Ireland1.pdf> (2012), 1; "1987/1988 OECD Economic Surveys; Ireland", OECD, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/1987/01/oecd-economic-surveys-ireland-1987_g1g170f5/eco_surveys-irl-1987-en.pdf (1987), 9.

975. Ireland broke the one-for-one link between the Irish pound (IEP) and the pound sterling (GBP) when Ireland joined the European Monetary System in 1978 and the UK remained outside. Exchange rates evolved considerably over this period, but in 1987 the exchange rate was approximately 1 GBP = 1.12 IEP.

976. Seán Cromien, "The story of the first 'Bórd Snip'", *Irish Journal of Public Policy*, 3.2 (2011), <https://journals.ucc.ie/index.php/ijpp/article/view/ijpp-3-2-9>; "1987/1988 OECD Economic Surveys; Ireland", 22.

cuts, centre-right governments also demonstrated economic liberalism by maintaining low levels of corporation tax to incentivise FDI. The low 10% rate for manufacturing enterprises was extended to new financial services companies in Dublin's International Financial Services Centre in 1987, and in 1998 secured EU permission to introduce a uniform rate of 12.5% for all companies from 2003 onwards.⁹⁷⁷ This approach was coupled with the more proactive use of state agencies, such as the Industrial Development Authority, to promote Ireland as a business-friendly destination for investment. These policies paid dividends towards the end of the century, with Ireland's net inflow of FDI as a percentage of GDP rising dramatically from just 2.4% in 1997 to 25.7% in 2000.⁹⁷⁸ This combination of public spending cuts and FDI-fuelled growth and cuts saw a major decline in public debt as a share of GDP, falling to below 30% by 2006.⁹⁷⁹

Alongside this economic liberalism, it is important to recognise that pragmatism also played a central role in the unprecedented growth of the Celtic Tiger years. This is particularly evident in Fianna Fáil's 1987, 'Programme for National Recovery' which implemented the policy of 'social partnership' – a system of triennial agreements negotiated between the government, employers and unions to balance wage restraint with tax cuts.⁹⁸⁰ This scheme was designed to promote both growth and industrial peace – that is, a lack of strikes – thus improving economic stability and adding further attraction for FDI in Ireland.

Sustained growth during this period was also helped by the stability that stemmed from Ireland's centre-right parties achieving consensus on this liberal economic model. Fianna Fáil lost power in 1994 after their coalition with Labour broke down, ushering in a Fine Gael-led

977. Elaine Marie Doyle et al., "The Evolution of the Irish 12.5 Percent Corporate Tax Rate: An Oral History", *Enterprise & Society* (2025), 1-25, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/enterprise-and-society/article/evolution-of-the-irish-125-percent-corporate-tax-rate-an-oral-history/D9A81A8E335B6D451AA2DB2111CEADFB>.

978. "Foreign direct investment, net inflows (% of GDP) – Ireland", World Bank Group, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINVWD.GD.ZS?locations=IE> (2025).

979. Hagemann, "Fiscal Rules for Ireland", 2.

980. O'Malley and McGraw, "Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity", 16.

‘Rainbow Coalition’ which relied on support from both Labour and the Democratic Left. However, this new coalition continued the policy of social partnership, negotiating a new agreement in early 1997 which the subsequent Fianna Fáil-PD coalition – elected in June 1997 – pledged to implement fully.⁹⁸¹

Economic success helped the Irish centre-right to retain its dominance through the nineties and noughties despite the political fragmentation explored in Box 7.3, earlier. Although their combined vote share was lower than in previous decades, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael together consistently secured around 65% of the vote during this period, even approaching 70% in the general election of May 2007.⁹⁸² Alas, in 2008, this situation was to change dramatically.

Post-crash austerity and realignment, 2008-present

The 2008 global financial crisis had a profoundly negative impact on the Irish economy and led to a collapse in support for the Irish centre-right, with the centre-right’s combined vote share dropping in each election since to only 43% in 2024.⁹⁸³

Pragmatism, once again, was a central feature during this post-crash era, as demonstrated by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael’s substantial adaptation of policy prospectus and political manoeuvring in order to retain control of government, as explored below. Nevertheless, the degree of flexibility required has also diluted the parties distinct political identities and increased their vulnerability to growing electoral challenges.

Ireland was particularly exposed to the global financial crisis due to its high reliance on FDI and a speculative property boom in the noughties – the product of excessive, under-regulated bank lending.⁹⁸⁴ The crash

981. Brian Sheehan and John Geary, “New Government to continue social partnership”, Eurofound, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/resources/article/1997/new-government-continue-social-partnership> (1997).

982. Conor O’Neill, “How Ireland voted in maps and charts”, Sky News, 1 December 2024, <https://news.sky.com/story/how-ireland-voted-in-maps-and-charts-13264419>.

983. Ibid.

984. Ó Gráda and O’Rourke, “The Irish economy during the century after partition”, 360.

therefore saw Ireland's GDP drop by 21% between 2008 and 2011.⁹⁸⁵ The incumbent Fianna Fáil-led government effectively surrendered economic control to the 'Troika' of the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the Eurogroup, which in 2010 imposed a three-year programme of fiscal consolidation to drastically reduce Ireland's budget deficit in order to reassure international lenders and markets. The mandated €15 billion of fiscal savings had to be raised by taxes including the new Universal Social Charge (USC) – an additional form of income tax on all salaries above an annual level of €13,000. The savings also involved a new Local Property Tax (LPT) – a self-assessed annual tax on residential property owners, who must estimate their property's market value and calculate the payment due. The programme also demanded cuts to public spending, including a hiring freeze and wage cuts in the public sector. Although ostensibly economically liberal, handing fiscal control to the Troika was above all pragmatic and sought to prevent the Irish economy from collapsing.

This shift had a massive negative impact on Fianna Fáil. In particular, handing control to the Troika seriously undermined the party's reputation for financial credibility and economic competence that it had built through its dominance during the Celtic Tiger years.⁹⁸⁶ In the 2011 election, the first since the crisis, Fianna Fáil's vote share collapsed by more than 24 percentage points and the party dropped from 78 to just 20 seats.⁹⁸⁷ Fine Gael was able to profit from this situation, forming a coalition with Labour. However, the new coalition Government oversaw a slow economic recovery period marked by persistent unemployment and significant cuts to public services. Indeed, the Government's 2011 austerity budget included plans to cut 23,500 public sector jobs over four years as part of a plan to save €2.5 billion by 2015.⁹⁸⁸ While steadily

985. Ó Ráiligh, "The Forthcoming General Election in the Republic of Ireland", 182.

986. O'Malley and McGraw, "Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity", 17.

987. "Election 2020: Results for 2011", *The Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/election2020/2011-results> (2020).

988. "Ireland announces new austerity budget", 6 December 2011, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ireland-vote-economy/timeline-ireland-announces-new-austerity-budget-idUSLDE7511KR20111206/>.

declining, unemployment only returned to pre-crash levels of 5% in 2019.⁹⁸⁹ Likewise, this period saw plummeting rates of social housing completion – dropping from over 8,500 in 2008 to less than 700 in 2015 – such that the number of households on social home waiting lists between 2011 and 2016 hovered around 90,000, over 30% higher than was the case before 2008.⁹⁹⁰ Amidst a lack of perceived tangible recovery, Fine Gael was punished in the 2016 election, losing a third of its vote share and becoming reliant on independents to form a minority government.

Throughout this period, Sinn Féin benefited from the decline of the centre-right parties, growing from 4 seats in 2007 to 14 in 2011 and 23 in 2016. A watershed moment came with the 2020 general election when the party won 25% of the popular vote: higher than either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. While Sinn Féin's total of 37 seats was one short of Fianna Fáil's 38 in 2020, it was widely recognised that the party could have won up to 11 more seats had it fielded sufficient candidates.⁹⁹¹ This election represented a major shift in Irish politics, seeing a total of 69 seats and 41.5% of the popular vote won by left-of-centre parties.⁹⁹² As discussed in Box 7.1 earlier, this forced Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to exercise their pragmatism and cross the Rubicon of Irish politics: entering into coalition together, alongside the Green Party, in order to remain in power.

Joining in coalition with the left-wing Green Party saw Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael move in a liberal direction on issues such as environmental policy. For example, during this coalition period, the centre-right government implemented the 2021 Climate Act which imposed a legally binding path to net-zero emissions no later than 2050

989. "Ireland Unemployment Rate", Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/ireland/unemployment-rate> (2025).

990. "Social Housing Supply: Submission to Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness", Social Justice Ireland, <https://www.socialjustice.ie/system/files/file-uploads/2021-09/2016-05-09-webfinalsubmission-to-oireachtas-committee-on-housing-and-homelessness.pdf> (2016); "Scale of waiting list figures show increased supply of new social housing essential to avoid a supply crisis – Housing Federation warns", Irish Council for Social Housing, <https://icsh.ie/scale-of-waiting-list-figures-show-increased-supply-of-new-social-housing-essential-to-avoid-a-supply-crisis-housing-federation-warns/> (2013).

991. "Election 2020: Results for 2016", *The Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/election2020/2016-results> (2020).

992. Ó Ráiligh, "The Forthcoming General Election in the Republic of Ireland", 183.

and halving emission by 2030.⁹⁹³ However, this shift has created some tensions within the centre-right voter base. This has been evidenced recently regarding the 2022 ban on the sale of peat as a fuel source, a policy implemented by the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael coalition in an effort to cut CO2 emissions. However, in 2022 turf was used as a heating fuel by 14% of Ireland's population and often represents the cheapest option for home heating.⁹⁹⁴ The policy has therefore provoked vocal negative reactions among conservative rural communities who see such environmental policies as undermining their traditional way of life.⁹⁹⁵

This period also saw similar shifts regarding welfare policy as centre-right coalition governments increasingly began to champion generous social security payments to support those who lost out since the 2008 financial crisis. This has been particularly noticeable since the COVID-19 pandemic with the government's extensive use of universal energy credits to help households with the cost of living. An initial €200 credit paid to all electricity accounts in December 2022 saw the normalisation of this policy which has since seen households receive €600 in 2023, €450 in 2024 and €250 in 2025.⁹⁹⁶ The current Government has ruled out any further use of energy credits for 2026, but this decision comes amid concern that over 400,000 domestic electricity and gas accounts in Ireland remain behind on payments.⁹⁹⁷

993. "Ireland's ambitious Climate Act signed into law", Government of Ireland, <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-environment-climate-and-communications/press-releases/irelands-ambitious-climate-act-signed-into-law/> (2021).

994. Hans von Sonntag, "The 'turf wars' heat up as Ireland transitions away from peat", Eurosite, <https://www.eurosite.org/the-turf-wars-heat-up-as-ireland-transitions-away-from-peat/> (2022); John Eakins et al., "Residential Solid Fuel Use in Ireland and the Transition Away from Solid Fuels", Environmental Protection Agency Research, https://www.epa.ie/publications/research/air/Research_Report_407.pdf (2022).

995. For example see:

Siobhan Cronin, "TD Collins says climate action policies are 'damaging rural communities'", *The Southern Star*, 27 April 2023, <https://www.southernstar.ie/news/td-collins-says-climate-action-policies-are-damaging-rural-communities-4262182>.

996. Oisín Gilmore, "The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2024", TASC, https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_inequality_report_2024_final.pdf (2024), 56; Social Justice Ireland, "Is a universal energy credit the best response to rising energy costs?", <https://www.socialjustice.ie/article/universal-energy-credit-best-response-rising-energy-costs> (2022); Citizens Information, "Budget 2024", <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/money-and-tax/budgets/budget-2024/> (2023); Citizens Information, "Electricity Account Credit", <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/consumer/utilities/electricity-account-credit/#:~:text=It%20was%20announced%20in%20Budget,January%20and%2028%20February%202025> (2024).

997. Maeve McTaggart and Charlie Weston, "No cost-of-living measures or energy credits in next Budget, Taoiseach Micheál Martin says", *Irish Independent*, 10 February 2025, <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/no-cost-of-living-measures-or-energy-credits-in-next-budget-taoiseach-micheal-martin-says/a1800047327.html>.

The use of energy credits during this period has been accompanied by a wide range of other expansionist welfare reforms, including extra social welfare payments and doubled Child Benefit payments.⁹⁹⁸ As such, the Irish 2025 budget committed a total of €2.6 billion to social security; the largest social security package in the history of Ireland.⁹⁹⁹

While unusual for an economically liberal, European centre-right party, such a pragmatic approach seems more justifiable given Ireland's economic context. Irish annual GDP growth has averaged 4.8% over the past four years and, despite a 0.5% contraction in 2024, is projected to recover to 4% in 2025.¹⁰⁰⁰ In this context, extensive multinational investment has generated healthy budget surpluses – reaching €25 billion in 2024 – which can fund this style of generous social security policy.¹⁰⁰¹ However, it is important to note that the model heavily relies on a narrow, international tax base which, as discussed below, makes Ireland more vulnerable to international economic shocks.¹⁰⁰²

Contemporary challenges

Having given an overview of the history of the Irish centre-right, this Chapter's final section explores the challenges it now faces, breaking these into four key challenges: demographic change, growing economic inequality, a political shift leftwards, and the rise of anti-establishment forces.

998. Citizens Information, "Extra social welfare payments from 29 October 2024," <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/whats-new/social-welfare-double-payments-and-cost-of-living-supports/> (2024); Citizens Information, "Child Benefit double payments", <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/whats-new/child-benefit-double-payments/> (2024).

999. Department of Social Protection, "Budget 2025", <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e8315-budget-2025/> (2024).

1000. "Ireland GDP Annual Growth Rate", World Economics, <https://www.worldeconomics.com/GrossDomesticProduct/GDP-Annual-Growth-Rate/Ireland.aspx> (2025); "Economic forecast for Ireland", European Commission, https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-economies/ireland/economic-forecast-ireland_en (2024).

1001. John Campbell, "A 'painful' Autumn statement and a 'bright' Irish budget", BBC, 5 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cqlvzlxld715o>.

1002. Aidan Regan, "How Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael spent like the left to stay in power", *Business Post*, 8 December 2024, <https://www.businesspost.ie/analysis-opinion/aidan-regan-how-fianna-fail-and-fine-gael-spent-like-the-left-to-stay-in-power/>.

Demographic change

The first of these challenges facing the Irish centre right is the task of maintaining their traditional, broad appeal in the context of unprecedented demographic change.

One traditional strength of the centre-right in Ireland has been the ability of its parties to appeal to a very wide voter base. This strength was exemplified above all by the dominance of Fianna Fáil in the twentieth century – O'Malley and McGraw stress that much of this relied on always being “ambiguous enough to be able to construct a coalition of support from the various sections in society”.¹⁰⁰³

Such a breadth of appeal was helped by the unifying force of Catholicism, but also by Ireland's relative lack of demographic change between 1922 and the sixties. Ireland's heavily agrarian society followed international trends during this period as agriculture shrank from employing 58% of all employed males in 1926 to just 43% in 1961.¹⁰⁰⁴ However, late industrialisation meant that Ireland lacked sufficient new urban jobs to meet demand. This shortfall precipitated a period of mass emigration – 500,000 people left Ireland during the fifties alone, the vast majority of them going to the UK.¹⁰⁰⁵ As a result, Ireland's total population of gainfully occupied males decreased from 950,000 in 1926 to 820,000 in 1961.¹⁰⁰⁶ While economically damaging, this brake on the growth of Ireland's urban working class protected the mainstream centre-right's broad appeal by undermining the formation of a new party that could capture a more urban electorate.¹⁰⁰⁷

However, demographic change in the late twentieth century has begun to seriously undermine the cross-class appeal that the centre-right, and particularly Fianna Fáil, was once able to generate. First, the centre-right tenet of social conservatism has been undermined by the steep decline of

1003. O'Malley and McGraw, “Fianna Fáil: the glue of ambiguity”, 14.

1004. Christopher Whelan et al., “Industrialisation, Class Formation and Social Mobility in Ireland”, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 79 (1992), 105-128 (107).

1005. University College Cork, “Irish Emigration History”, <https://www.ucc.ie/en/emigre/history/> (2024).

1006. Whelan et al., “Industrialisation, Class Formation and Social Mobility in Ireland”, 107.

1007. Little and Farrell, “The Party System: At a Critical Juncture”, 526; Weeks, “Parties and the party system”, 143-46.

Ireland's religious population. The Irish Catholic Church's longstanding alliance with nationalist forces since the nineteenth century helped to reduce the possibility of polarisation along class lines.¹⁰⁰⁸ However, religion has since lost much of its traditional centrality in Irish society. Church attendance in the seventies was over 90%, but by 2016 this figure had dropped to 40%.¹⁰⁰⁹ Religion has therefore become less of a unifying force.¹⁰¹⁰ This was recently illustrated by referenda on legalising same-sex marriage in 2015 and abortion in 2018. While both votes passed fairly comfortably, with 62% and 66% support respectively, they nevertheless illustrate how Catholicism in Ireland is no longer the unifying cultural force it once was.¹⁰¹¹

Immigration has also begun to have a significant impact on Ireland's demography.¹⁰¹² For most of the twentieth century, Ireland maintained very low levels of immigration, and only became a net importer of people in 1996.¹⁰¹³ Even then, rising immigration levels had little impact on cultural homogeneity, as a substantial proportion of this intake was made up of returning emigrants – a group which made up more than half of all immigrants in the nineties.¹⁰¹⁴ This pattern has changed in the past two decades. In 1996, less than 7% of Ireland's population was foreign-born.¹⁰¹⁵ This figure had jumped to almost 20% by 2022, four percentage points higher than the UK figure that same year.¹⁰¹⁶ Irish citizens remain

1008. Gail McElroy, "Party competition in Ireland: The Emergence of a Left-Right Dimension?", in Michael Marsh et al. (eds.), *A Conservative Revolution?: Electoral Change in Twenty-first-century Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 61-82 (61).

1009. Marsh, "The (Un)Changing Irish Voter", 560-61.

1010. *Ibid.*, 559.

1011. Éanna Ó Caollaí and Mark Hilliard, "Ireland becomes first country to approve same-sex marriage by popular vote", *The Irish Times*, 24 May 2015, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/ireland-becomes-first-country-to-approve-same-sex-marriage-by-popular-vote-1.2223646>; "Irish abortion referendum: Ireland overturns abortion ban", BBC, 26 May 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-44256152>.

1012. Eoin O'Malley, "Why is there no Radical Right Party in Ireland?", *West European Politics*, 31.5 (2008), 960-77 (966-67).

1013. Steve Garner, "Ireland and immigration: explaining the absence of the far right", *Patterns of Prejudice*, 41.2 (2007), 109-130.

1014. *Ibid.*

1015. Central Statistics Office (CSO), "ADR21. Population, usually resident and present in the State, classified by place of birth and sex", <https://www.cso.ie/en/census/census1996reports/census1996principaldemographicresults/> (2024).

1016. CSO, "Census of Population 2022 – Summary Results", <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/migrationanddiversity/> (2022); Migration Observatory, "Migrants in the UK: An Overview", <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-ukan-overview/> (2024).

optimistic about this change – surveyed in March 2024 by Ireland’s Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), over 70% of the population feel positive about the impacts of immigration.¹⁰¹⁷ However, the issue is growing in electoral salience – the same ESRI report found a “sharp and substantial” rise in the importance of immigration for voters, with signs of a growing left-right divide in terms of attitudes on the topic.¹⁰¹⁸

Mitigating economic inequality

A further challenge facing Ireland’s centre-right parties is the growing electoral polarisation linked to economic inequality. This is a change which came to the fore in the fallout of the 2008 global financial crisis and especially by the time of the 2020 election. While Ireland’s economy was seen to be recovering from the financial crash by around 2013, the effects of austerity – as mandated by the Troika and implemented by the Fine Gael-led coalition – were not felt evenly, with a large cohort of households on lower and middle incomes not directly benefiting from the national economic recovery.¹⁰¹⁹ Ipsos polling ahead of the 2020 election showed that almost two-thirds of voters felt they had felt no improvement from the economic upturn.¹⁰²⁰ Indeed, the Structure of Earnings Survey 2022 showed Irish hourly earnings were the fourth most unequally distributed out of 32 European countries sampled, such that earners in the ninetieth percentile earned over four times earners in the tenth percentile.¹⁰²¹

This lack of recovery in the bottom income deciles has particularly manifested itself with regards to housing and homelessness. The period of 2011 to 2020 saw house prices rise at triple the rate of nominal

1017. James Laurence et al., “Attitudes towards immigration and refugees in Ireland: Understanding recent trends and drivers”, The Economic & Social Research Institute, <https://www.esri.ie/publications/attitudes-towards-immigration-and-refugees-in-ireland-understanding-recent-trends-and> (2024), vii-ix.

1018. *Ibid.*

1019. Müller and Regan, “Are Irish voters moving to the left?”, 536.

1020. Fiachra Ó Cionnaith, “Most feel economic recovery has not helped them – poll”, RTE, 9 February 2020, <https://www.rte.ie/news/election-2020/2020/0209/1114120-exit-poll-economy/>.

1021. Ciarán Nugent, “Ireland is an outlier in wage inequality among high income European economies and it’s getting worse”, Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI), <https://neriinstitute.net/blog/ireland-outlier-wage-inequality-among-high-income-european-economies-and-its-getting-worse#:~:text=In%202018%2C%20the%20worker%20at,highest%20paid%20in%20the%20sample> (2022).

wage increases, with rental prices increasing by 50% and the supply of new social housing falling to historic lows.¹⁰²² Homelessness rose from 3,800 to 10,150 in the same period, with this figure having since risen to over 14,000.¹⁰²³ As a result, housing has steadily risen in electoral salience, appearing as voters' clear top priority in the 2024 election: 28% of voters listed housing as their most important concern, compared to 19% for the cost of living and 17% for health.¹⁰²⁴

The question of housing is given added importance for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael given that the issue is a major worry for young people. A 2025 survey of Ireland's 25-year-olds by the Central Statistics Office found that an overwhelming 98% were either somewhat or very concerned about their housing prospects.¹⁰²⁵ As elsewhere in Europe, this is a demographic where the centre-right is struggling to cut through; while Sinn Féin's vote share amongst 25-34 year-olds rose by 4.3 percentage points between 2020 and 2024, Fianna Fáil dropped by 4.2 points and Fine Gael dropped by 6.3 points.¹⁰²⁶

Both the parties of the Irish centre-right have adopted relatively high levels of state intervention in response to this problem. The extent of the Irish state's current redistributive role is illustrated by the fact that, despite having some of the highest levels of gross income inequality in Europe, disposable income inequality in Ireland is far lower and sits roughly in line with other developed economies.¹⁰²⁷ However, this system of generous state redistribution is vulnerable. Ireland draws on a very narrow tax base – over a quarter of Irish tax revenue in 2023 came from corporate tax receipts, with over half of this paid by the ten largest

1022. Ó Rálaigh, "The Forthcoming General Election in the Republic of Ireland", 182.

1023. *Ibid.*

1024. Colin Gleeson, "The complete exit poll results: the most important voter issues and second preference details", *The Irish Times*, 30 November 2024, <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2024/11/30/housing-and-homelessness-biggest-issue-for-voters-exit-poll-shows/>.

1025. Jack White, "What's it like to be 25 in Ireland today?", 27 January 2025, *The Irish Times*, [https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2025/01/27/stuck-in-the-family-home-worried-about-finding-their-own-place-whats-it-like-to-be-25-in-ireland-today/#:~:text=The%20first%20of%20two%20cohorts,first%20surveyed%20at%20age%20nine.&text=The%20fifth%20survey%20of%20this,very%20concerned%20about%20housing%20prospects](https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2025/01/27/stuck-in-the-family-home-worried-about-finding-their-own-place-whats-it-like-to-be-25-in-ireland-today/#:~:text=The%20first%20of%20two%20cohorts,first%20surveyed%20at%20age%20nine.&text=The%20fifth%20survey%20of%20this,very%20concerned%20about%20housing%20prospects.).

1026. Conor O'Neill, "How Ireland voted in maps and charts", Sky News, 1 December 2024, <https://news.sky.com/story/how-ireland-voted-in-maps-and-charts-13264419>.

1027. Gilmore, "The state we are in", 4.

multinationals.¹⁰²⁸ This is as compared to just 9% in the UK during the same period.¹⁰²⁹ Ireland's ability to mitigate its high income inequality is therefore contingent on tax receipts which are vulnerable to any future economic shocks or protectionist turns that might cause foreign investment to dry up – such as might come from the introduction of further American tariffs in 2025.¹⁰³⁰

Ireland's leftward shift

The economic and demographic changes detailed above have fed into a further, overarching challenge for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael – the fact that Irish politics appears to be moving steadily leftwards.

In electoral studies through the noughties, the average left-right placement of Irish voters on a 0-10 scale ranged between 5.8 and 6.¹⁰³¹ However, by 2020 this figure had dropped to 4.3, with even Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael voters demonstrating a slightly left-leaning attitude.¹⁰³² In a 2021 paper on this subject, Stefan Müller and Aidan Regan concluded that the “average Irish voter increasingly self-identifies on the centre-left,” with this shift given a sense of permanence by the fact that “these same self-identified left voters hold consistent and coherent socio-economic policy preferences”.¹⁰³³

A shift of this magnitude makes it much more challenging for centre-right parties to maintain a strategy of pragmatism without abandoning both their core identity and their traditional voter base. This has been clearly visible with regards to cultural issues, where both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have made some clear missteps as they track

1028. Daniel Murray, “Reliance on multinationals a ‘significant risk’ to economy and public finances”, *Business Post*, 20 October 2024, <https://www.businesspost.ie/news/reliance-on-multinationals-a-significant-risk-to-economy-and-public-finances/>.

1029. Matthew Keep, “Tax statistics: an overview”, House of Commons Library, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8513/> (2024).

1030. Padraic Halpin, “Soaring corporate tax an ‘incredible vulnerability’ for Irish economy – official”, Reuters, 4 July 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/soaring-corporate-tax-an-incredible-vulnerability-irish-economy-official-2022-07-04/>.

1031. Stefan Müller and Aidan Regan, “Are Irish voters moving to the left?”, *Irish Political Studies*, 36.4 (2021), 535-555 (542).

1032. Ibid.

1033. Ibid. 549

leftwards in attempts to follow popular opinion. The best example of this came in March 2024 when the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael coalition was humiliatingly defeated in two constitutional referenda proposing to extend the definition of family to include durable relationships outside marriage and to replace gendered language on women and mothers in the home. In both referenda, the coalition supported the ‘Yes’ vote. Two ‘No’ victories – of 68% and 74% respectively – showed that centre-right parties had paradoxically moved further left than the populace in their search for Ireland’s political centre of gravity.¹⁰³⁴

The centre-right has also been pulled in opposite directions on economic policy. Left-leaning attitudes on economics were widely evidenced by extensive protests against the introduction of water charges in 2015.¹⁰³⁵ Households drawing water from the mains – rather than private supplies, as is the case in rural areas – had never previously been charged. Despite this privilege reportedly costing the Irish state one billion euros per year, campaigners successfully managed to overturn the charges in 2017.¹⁰³⁶ However, expectations for budgetary restraint remain on the centre-right. This came to the fore in 2017 though Fine Gael politician Leo Varadkar, whose successful campaign for party leadership was built on an economically liberal platform that focused particularly on welfare fraud and promising to deliver for “the people who get up early in the morning”.¹⁰³⁷ However, Varadkar steadily backed away from this position once in government. He served as taoiseach from 2017 to 2020 and again from 2022 to 2024, adopting a low-tax, high-spend programme and resigning in 2024 having widely been seen to have failed to deliver on his campaign promises.¹⁰³⁸

1034. “Irish referendums: Voters reject changes to family and care definition”, BBC, 9 March 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-68484651>.

1035. “Universal water charges in Ireland to come to an end”, BBC, 13 April 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39594886>.

1036. *Ibid.*

1037. Kara Fox, “Ireland’s next prime minister is a conservative, gay 38-year-old”, CNN World, 2 June 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/02/europe/leo-varadkar-ireland-prime-minister-young-gay-conservative/index.html>.

1038. Diarmaid Ferriter, “Leo Varadkar did not fulfill his promise for ‘people who get up early’”, *The Irish Times*, 21 March 2024, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2024/03/22/diarmaid-ferriter-leo-varadkar-did-not-fulfill-his-promise-for-people-who-get-up-early/>.

Anti-establishment sentiment

One final challenge facing the Irish centre-right is the growing threat posed by anti-establishment, populist sentiment.

Since its independence struggle in the early twentieth century, Ireland has been set apart from the politics of other European nations by the fact that no populist radical right-wing party has ever gained traction – note that the term ‘radical’ is added here as Fianna Fáil has sometimes demonstrated populist tendencies, particularly in its use of anti-elitist rhetoric used to support its ‘national movement’ image, but is ultimately still best described as a non-populist, centre-right party.¹⁰³⁹

While the rise of populist right-wing parties is not an exact science, academics such as sociologist Jens Rydgren and political scientist Herbert Kitschelt have identified a number of conditions correlated with their emergence, which include policy convergence in the political mainstream, openness of the system to new entrants and increasing voter distrust thanks to clientelism and corruption.¹⁰⁴⁰ Eoin O'Malley stresses that Ireland has displayed several of these traits for many years, with clientelism and corruption in particular becoming well-established focal points in Irish politics.¹⁰⁴¹ This has been evidenced in high-profile corruption cases against centre-right figures such as Fianna Fáil leader Charles Haughey – taoiseach four times between 1979 and 1992 – who in 2006 was found to have taken more than £7 million of bribes from wealthy businessmen during his time in office.¹⁰⁴²

However, alongside the conditions that might facilitate the emergence of a populist radical right-wing party, Ireland has also long benefitted from key buffers against such a development. The first of these is the proportional representation-single transferable vote (PR-STV) system used in Irish elections. This model – which allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, from which between three and five

1039. O'Malley, “Why is there no Radical Right Party in Ireland?”, 960-62.

1040. *Ibid.*, 966-68.

1041. Neil Collins, “Parliamentary Democracy in Ireland”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 57 (2004), 601-612.

1042. Owen Bowcott, “Bungs, blank cheques and the Boss: final verdict delivered on Haughey's corruption”, *The Guardian*, 20 December 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/dec/20/ireland>.

members are selected according to constituency size – naturally favours larger parties with the organisational capacity to field many candidates and thus benefit from the maximum number of transferred votes. These parties can strategically manage vote distribution among their candidates, maximizing their chances of securing seats.

Second, the growth of the left-wing nationalist party Sinn Féin has effectively filled the anti-establishment, populist electoral space where such a right-wing party would emerge. The party's core voter base mirrors the demographic that are often drawn to support the populist right elsewhere in Europe: young, poor and less educated.¹⁰⁴³ Sinn Féin has been shown to contain a sizeable protest vote element, with “a generalised grievance towards government” being a key predictor of voting intention among its supporters in 2020.¹⁰⁴⁴

However, Sinn Féin's role as an anti-populist shock absorber has been significantly diminished since the party's successes at the 2020 election prompted it to reposition itself as a party of government and moderate its policy offering away from unrealistic populism.¹⁰⁴⁵ For example, it dropped its longstanding commitment to implement a controversial wealth tax of one percent on net wealth above €1 million.¹⁰⁴⁶ This moderate shift has been linked to a clear downturn in Sinn Féin's electoral fortunes. Polling from May 2024 predicted that Sinn Féin would win 21% of the vote in local elections taking place in June.¹⁰⁴⁷ Despite this, the party won just 12% of the vote, losing support to independents and small parties.¹⁰⁴⁸ Likewise, at the 2024 general election, Sinn Féin's vote share dropped by over five percentage points. Political scientist Chris

1043. O'Malley, “Why is there no Radical Right Party in Ireland?”, 974-76.

1044. Ó Rálaigh, “The Forthcoming General Election in the Republic of Ireland”, 183.

1045. O'Toole, “Sinn Féin was the shock absorber of Irish politics. It's worn out”, 2024.

1046. O'Malley, “Ireland After the 2024 EP Elections”, 226-27; Hugh O'Connell et al., “Sinn Féin drops immediate wealth tax plans on net wealth above €1 million in alternative budget”, *Irish Independent*, 4 October 2023, <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/politics/sinn-fein-drops-immediate-wealth-tax-plans-on-net-wealth-above-1-million-in-alternative-budget/a849581264.html>.

1047. Red C, “Opinion Poll Report May 2024”, <https://redcresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Business-Post-RED-C-Opinion-Poll-Report-May-2024.pdf> (2024).

1048. Rory Carroll, “Disappointment for Sinn Féin as Irish local elections bolster coalition”, *The Guardian*, 10 June 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/10/disappointment-for-sinn-fein-as-irish-local-elections-bolster-coalition>.

Ó Rálaigh identifies a clear correlation between Sinn Féin's decline, the rise of anti-immigrant politics and "the gradual movement by Sinn Féin towards identifying itself as a party of government as opposed to a party of protest".¹⁰⁴⁹ Sinn Féin is therefore no longer able to soak up the anti-establishment vote in the way it once did.

The potential impact of protest voting has increased in importance especially as immigration has steadily gained in electoral relevance. While only 6% of Irish voters cited immigration as their top issue in the 2024 general election, this still represented a significant jump from 2020 when the equivalent figure was less than 1%.¹⁰⁵⁰ Likewise, the intensity of emotions around this issue was manifested clearly in the violent anti-immigration riots that overran Dublin in November 2023.¹⁰⁵¹ These riots erupted around a stabbing attack outside a primary school which was followed by widespread online misinformation that the perpetrator was an illegal immigrant – the subsequent unrest saw hundreds of rioters torch buses, loot shops, and attack several gardaí,¹⁰⁵² resulting in over €20 million in damages and dozens of arrests.¹⁰⁵³

There is a chance that a buffer against populism may persist in Ireland in the form of the independent TDs who make up 9% of the Dáil – the highest proportion of independents of any parliamentary chamber in Europe.¹⁰⁵⁴ These TDs tend towards a brand of agrarian conservatism and therefore serve to break up the rural right-wing base that might otherwise rally behind a radical populist alternative.¹⁰⁵⁵

1049. Ó Rálaigh, "The Forthcoming General Election in the Republic of Ireland", 188.

1050. Colin Gleeson, "The complete exit poll results: the most important voter issues and second preference details", *The Irish Times*, 30 November 2024, <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2024/11/30/housing-and-homelessness-biggest-issue-for-voters-exit-poll-shows/>.

1051. Rory Carroll, "Government is not listening: anger over immigration spills into riot on Dublin's streets", *The Guardian*, 24 November 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/24/anger-immigration-riot-dublin-ireland>.

1052. Gardaí: Policemen. Short for 'An Garda Síochána,' meaning 'The Guardians of the Peace,' this term refers to the national police force of Ireland. 'Gardaí' is the plural; the singular is 'Garda.'

1053. "How misinformation and far-right groups sparked a riot in Dublin after the stabbing of three children at a school", European Digital Media Observatory, 28 November 2023, <https://edmo.eu/publications/how-misinformation-and-far-right-groups-sparked-a-riot-in-dublin-after-the-stabbing-of-three-children-at-a-school/>.

1054. Shane Harrison, "Ireland's far right flopped in the general election – but its threat remains", Chatham House, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2024-12/irelands-far-right-flopped-general-election-its-threat-remains> (2024).

1055. Ibid.

However, these candidates also represent a growing danger to the Irish centre-right. Though all were unsuccessful, the 2024 general election saw a proliferation of independent candidates from the populist radical right.¹⁰⁵⁶ Given their lack of a common party, the vote share of the populist radical right was diluted and its full strength not felt. Ireland is therefore witnessing the emergence of a floating anti-establishment vote that is currently scattered but could feasibly coalesce with a new charismatic populist leader or a political crisis.

Evidence suggests that – at least for the time being – centre-right parties are handling this threat well. Despite right-wing populist sentiment gaining momentum around the 2023 Dublin riots and June 2024 local elections – where five aggressively anti-immigration councillors were elected – this momentum did not translate into votes at the 2024 general election.¹⁰⁵⁷ No populist right-wing candidate gained more than 4% of the vote in any one constituency.¹⁰⁵⁸ While taking some visible steps to address immigration – such as erecting street barricades to prevent asylum seekers camping in public places – the centre-right government's main strategy against the populist right was to effectively adapt their communications: for example scaling back their previous approach of announcing new International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) centres.¹⁰⁵⁹

However, as outlined above, the threat of a radical opponent to the right of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael is growing ever stronger and the silent treatment on immigration will not work forever, as has been seen in other countries across Europe. To maintain their electoral success, Ireland's centre-right parties will need to recognise this danger, find a way to reach out to the floating anti-establishment vote and, importantly,

1056. Ibid.

1057. Shane Raymond, "Profiled: Meet Ireland's new far-right councillors", *The Journal*, 13 June 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/far-right-candidates-ireland-local-councils-6403594-jun2024/>.

1058. "Greens, far-right among big losers in Irish vote", *France 24*, 2 December 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241202-greens-far-right-among-big-losers-in-irish-vote>.

1059. Shane Harrison, "Ireland's far right flopped in the general election – but its threat remains", *Chatham House*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2024-12/irelands-far-right-flopped-general-election-its-threat-remains> (2024).

avoid triggering any new scandals around which it could coalesce.

The next Chapter in this report will draw together findings from across the five countries studied in this report, outlining the leading challenges facing the centre-right at a pan-European level.

Chapter Eight: Challenges of the European centre-right

So far, this report has examined the philosophy, history and contemporary challenges of the centre-right across European countries – the United Kingdom, France, Poland, Germany and Ireland. This Chapter now draws on the lessons of the previous Chapters to highlight and explain the leading contemporary challenges faced in common by the centre-right across Europe, supporting these with reference to European countries outside of our case studies thus far.

At the start of this report, we identified the key three principles of the European centre-right, and from these flowed particularised principles in different European countries. For contemporary challenges, we are doing the reverse: having described the particularised contemporary challenges for the different countries, we can derive from this the leading contemporary challenges facing the modern centre-right across Europe.

These four leading contemporary challenges to the modern European centre-right are: the ascendancy of right-wing populism; unclear differentiation from a left-wing alternative; poor record on economic policy in recent times; and demographic change.

The ascendancy of right-wing populism

In four of the five countries studied in this report, the emergence of right-wing populism has become an increasingly major challenge for the centre-right. With the populist right growing, the centre-right is

having to compete with them for voters and sometimes power. This has been especially so in France where the *Front National* (FN) – rebranded in 2018 as the *Rassemblement National* (RN) – became an established electoral force as early as 1984 and has since had a major impact on both the policy prospectus and electoral fortunes of the French centre-right, all the while growing to now become France’s largest individual political party.

The appeal of right-wing populism can be obvious to many across the centre-right. It shares one crucial characteristic with the centre-right – it is non-cosmopolitan, often to the degree of anti-cosmopolitanism. It can also be conservative or economically liberal, though it does not have to be, and indeed usually the centre-right is both more socially conservative and more economically liberal than the populist right in any given country, as shown in detail earlier in this report in Charts 2.2 and 2.4. For example, in Germany, according to the 2024 Chapel Hill survey, the centre-right CDU rates the importance of religious principles in politics at 6.4 out of 10, as compared to 4.9 for the right-wing populist AfD; and, in France, according to that same survey, the centre-right LR rates deregulation of the markets at 7.3 – with 10 meaning strongly favouring deregulation and 0 strongly opposing it – while the populist RN rates it at 4.0.¹⁰⁶⁰

The essential distinction between the centre-right and the populist right is that the centre-right is necessarily centrist, as per the definition in Chapter Two of this report, which the populist right never is. While the centre-right seeks to work with the established institutions and reform rather than abolish them, the populist right seeks to destroy, capture or revolutionise them.

This lays ground for an argument in favour of ignoring populism. Since populism is necessarily opposed to the establishment, it can never sustain itself in power as this would involve becoming the very thing

1060. Seth Jolly et al., “25 Years of Political Party Positions in Europe: The Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 1999-2024,” working paper, <https://www.chesdata.eu/ches-europe>.

it abhors. Following this logic, populism could never post a genuine, lasting threat to the political centre, and as such requires no solution. This dismissive attitude towards populism is mistaken.

First, populists have exhibited the ability to redefine the establishment as residing in corporate power or unelected officials. We can see this with the left-wing populist Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and likewise with right-wing populists such as Donald Trump in the United States and Vladimir Mečiar in Slovakia. When this is the case, populism is capable of sustaining itself in elected power with the continued mission to reduce the power of corporations or unelected officials.¹⁰⁶¹ For example, one of the slogans on which Donald Trump ran for election was “draining the swamp,” a term used to refer to reducing the influence of unelected officials who control the US government.¹⁰⁶² What is more, populists are capable of taking control of unelected offices while continuing to claim that, in fact, the establishment is still truly in control of them. This is exemplified by the Polish party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS), which continued to make such claims about the Polish judicial system after returning to power in 2015, this despite having already undermined its independence and gained a high level of influence over the court system through a series of controversial reforms.¹⁰⁶³

Second, populists can still be a formidable threat even if they are incapable of remaining in or even coming into power: first, by taking votes away from the centre-right and so letting the centre-left into government or otherwise forcing the centre-right into undesirable electoral arrangements; and, second, by continuously reforming and re-emerging with each new iteration of a populist party achieving electoral success in the short term.

The first of these problems is best illustrated by the example of

1061. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser, “Populism”, in Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

1062. BBC, “How might Trump ‘drain the swamp’?”, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-us-2016-37699073> (2016).

1063. John Macy and Allyson K. Duncan, “The collapse of judicial independence in Poland: A cautionary tale”, <https://judicature.duke.edu/articles/the-collapse-of-judicial-independence-in-poland-a-cautionary-tale/> (2020).

France, where the rise of RN has greatly contributed to the decline of the mainstream centre-right party, LR, by poaching its voters. This loss of votes and seats clearly demonstrated at the 2024 legislative election, when LR leader Éric Ciotti split the party through an abortive alliance with RN that saw 16 would-be LR seats defect to a new RN-aligned party *Union des Droites pour la République* (UDR). This is also well-illustrated by the example of Germany, where votes for the populist AfD meant in the parliamentary election of 2025 that the centre-right CDU/CSU has been forced to enter into coalition with the centre-left SPD. Had AfD's voters voted for the CDU/CSU, the German centre-right would have enough votes to govern as a single entity.¹⁰⁶⁴

The second of these problems is best illustrated by the example of Poland. Populists have continuously formed and re-formed parties throughout Polish political history, beginning with BBWR, which collectively won over 11% of the vote in 1993 before their vote was largely absorbed by the centre-right AWS. In the noughties, populists had re-emerged as an independent political identity under the banners of SRP and LRP. Those parties won around a fifth of the vote in both 2001 and 2005, and even briefly entered government between 2006 and 2007. Following the collapse of SRP and LRP, the right-wing populist *Solidarna Polska* was an influential member of the PiS-led governments between 2015 and 2023, contributing to the takeover of PiS itself by right-wing populism; while left-wing populists briefly, in 2011, secured 10% of the popular vote under the banner of *Ruch Palikota*. Despite the failure of successive populist parties to remain in government, populist parties continued to re-emerge and threaten the Polish centre-right: ultimately with success.

Indeed, populism has proven increasingly popular in Europe over the last 15 years. While in 2010 around 5% of European voters voted for

1064. Ben Knight, "Sahra Wagenknecht: Rise and fall of Germany's shooting star", <https://www.dw.com/en/sahra-wagenknecht-alliance-the-rise-and-fall-of-germanys-shooting-star/a-71741165> (2025).

right-wing populist parties, this has steadily risen to 24% as of 2025.¹⁰⁶⁵ Consequently, the populist right has become the main governing party in major European nations such as Italy and the Netherlands – in both cases, in coalition with the centre-right, represented by *Forza Italia* (FI) in the former and by *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD) and *Nieuw Sociaal Contract* (NSC) in the latter.

There are multiple competing theories as to the source of this recent spike in popularity. Some of the most popular ones include that support for populism is linked to increased immigration levels;¹⁰⁶⁶ backlash against the perceived cultural attitudes of liberal elites;¹⁰⁶⁷ a perceived collapse in law and order; and declining or stagnating living standards.¹⁰⁶⁸ A 2022 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study persuasively shows, however, that none of these theories is a sufficient stand-alone explanation for the phenomenon of populism.¹⁰⁶⁹ Across different countries, when each of these factors is controlled for, no single strong predictor of support for right-wing populism emerges. Instead, each one of the above plays a role.¹⁰⁷⁰ In Poland, for example, populists have been more successful than any other populists in the European countries we studied in this report, controlling the government for eight years despite low immigration levels, strong law and order and generally improving living standards. The cultural attitudes of Poles voting for populists also differ greatly from the cultural attitudes of right-wing populists in multiple other European countries: for example, in Western Europe, religious practice is negatively correlated with right-wing populist vote, while in Eastern Europe the opposite is true.¹⁰⁷¹

1065. The Economist, “Hard-right parties are now Europe’s most popular”, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2025/02/28/hard-right-parties-are-now-europes-most-popular> (2025).

1066. Daphne Halikiopoulou and Tim Vlandas, “Understanding right-wing populism and what to do about it”, Friedrich Every Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/19110-20220517.pdf> (2022).

1067. Pippa Norris, *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

1068. Janan Ganesh, “What abundance can’t achieve”, *Financial Times*, 19 April 2025.

1069. Daphne Halikiopoulou and Tim Vlandas, “Understanding right-wing populism and what to do about it”, Friedrich Every Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/19110-20220517.pdf> (2022).

1070. Ibid., 32.

1071. Ibid.

The centre-right has attempted to deal with the problem of the populist right in two, ways: delegitimising it, often in cooperation with the political left; and imitating it.

Delegitimisation

The aim of delegitimisation is to present the populist right as a non-serious political option; one that could never enter government and that is not worth engaging in democratic life. With this strategy, voters are meant to be persuaded that voting for the populist right is tantamount to not voting at all, as the populist right will never be able to achieve anything and will never wield any power or influence because of their extreme policies.

This tactic has been, until recently, a staple of the German centre-right, which has maintained a so-called ‘firewall’ against the populist AfD. According to this firewall, which stems from a firm desire to avoid a repeat of the German far-right takeover of the thirties,¹⁰⁷² there is to be no cooperation with any parties seen as far right, such as the AfD, and such parties are to be excluded from any role in government. A similar approach existed in French politics for most of the post-war period through the policy of the *cordon sanitaire*, whereby mainstream parties from both the left and right typically refused to cooperate, form alliances or govern with the FN. However, this resolve has weakened in recent years as FN’s support kept rising, as indicated by the centre-right’s aforementioned alliance with RN in 2024 under Éric Ciotti.

The problem with attempts to delegitimise the populist right is that it aggravates the anti-establishment sentiments that populist parties’ voters already often feel, hence making them less likely to support centrist parties.¹⁰⁷³ Moreover, this approach is based on the assumption that right-wing populist parties have nothing valuable to add to the

1072. Jens Thurau and Elizabeth Schumacher, “Germany: What is the ‘AfD firewall’?”, <https://www.dw.com/en/afd-firewall-germany-political-consensus-explained/a-71457050> (2025).

1073. Bart Bonikowski, “Three Lessons of Contemporary Populism in Europe and the United States”, *Brown Journal of World Affairs* (2016), 9-24.

democratic political process, ignoring the reality that right-wing populists often draw attention to genuine political problems that other parties are neglecting – albeit often doing so in an inflammatory manner.

The delegitimisation tactic has consequently been unsuccessful in Germany in preventing the populist right from gaining electoral support. AfD's vote share almost doubled – from 13% to 21% – between the 2017 and 2025 *Bundestag* elections, whereas the CDU/CSU's vote share has fallen from 33% to 29%.¹⁰⁷⁴ On the other hand, it is worth recognising that this tactic has been successful in preventing AfD from having any significant influence on any German government and policymaking at a federal level. The AfD, over the course of its history, has been unable to successfully introduce and pass a single bill in the German *Bundestag* and bills that the AfD has voted for would have passed even without the AfD's contribution. The one controversial exception to this came in February 2025, when CDU party leader Friedrich Merz relied on AfD votes to try to pass a *Bundestag* motion to introduce more restrictive migration law.¹⁰⁷⁵ Merz's proposed law aimed to dramatically tighten Germany's migration and asylum system by turning away asylum seekers and other migrants at the border, suspending family reunification for two years, expanding the list of safe countries for deportation, and increasing the capacity for detaining migrants pending deportation.¹⁰⁷⁶

1074. The Federal Returning Officer, "Bundestag election 2017", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2017/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> (2025); The Federal Returning Officer, "Bundestag election 2021", <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> (2025); The Federal Returning Officer, "Bundestag election 2025", <https://bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2025/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> (2025).

1075. Michelle Pace, "German election: Far-right firewall weakens as immigration concerns take centre stage" <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/02/german-election-far-right-firewall-weakens-immigration-concerns-take-centre-stage> (2025).

1076. Tamsin Paternoster, "German opposition leader Merz's migration plan passes parliament", <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/29/germanys-opposition-leader-merz-vows-to-push-asylum-law-change-through-parliament> (2025).

Imitation

The aim of imitating populists is to take away voters from the populist right. The centre-right generally boasts multiple advantages over the populist right, including a larger existing voter base, greater institutional continuity and more experience of government. Accordingly, if the centre-right were to acquire all the advantages that the populist right has – which is achieved by imitating the populist right – it would eliminate any reason for one to vote for the populist right instead of the centre-right.

This strategy has often been used by the centre-right in France, which has regularly imitated the policies and rhetoric of the populist right since the eighties in order to capitalise on its appeal. This was the case especially under the leadership of President Nicolas Sarkozy between 2007 and 2012. Sarkozy specifically targeted voters of the FN with a populist policy prospectus including proposals for tougher immigration controls and a clampdown on crime and delinquency; and populist rhetoric, regularly resorting to ethnically-charged, anti-establishment language.¹⁰⁷⁷

Box 8.1. The Italian centre-right: imitation and symbiosis

Worth mentioning here is also the example of Italy. Although not one of our case studies, the Italian centre-right has been one of the most powerful centre-rights in Western European history. It is also probably the best example of a European centre-right party that has embraced a symbiotic relationship with the populist right. In Italy, the largest centre-right party, *Forza Italia* (FI), is a part of a governing coalition together with right-wing populists, non-cosmopolitans and conservatives, represented by *Lega per Salvini Premier* (LSP) and the largest party in the Italian Parliament, *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI). FdI's Giorgia Meloni is

1077. Aurélien Mondon, "The Front National in the twenty-first century: From pariah to republican democratic contender", *Modern and Contemporary France* (2014), 301-320.

currently the Italian Prime Minister; a position she gained after difficult coalition talks with the FI which was, at the time, led by the three-time Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who displayed many populist characteristics. The current Italian government is supported not just by FI, but also by the liberal conservative and Christian democratic parties *Noi moderati* (NM) and *Unione di Centro* (UdC) and is opposed by the left-wing populist *Movimento 5 Stelle* (MS5). This is the result of the Italian centre-right effectively being forced to choose – upon the formation of Meloni's government in 2022 – between siding with the right-wing populists in government or the left-wing populists in opposition. The Italian centre-right's long-standing close relationship with Italian right-wing populism has also arguably served to moderate it, as illustrated with the example of Meloni, whose well-designed migration policies have been praised even by the centre-left UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer.¹⁰⁷⁸ This example illustrates that being close to populists can at least have positive effects once they are powerful enough to take power, though the centre-right should not function on the assumption of being resigned to defeat.

The crucial problem with imitating the populist right is that it exposes a lack of consistency and vision within the centre-right's philosophy, as well as antagonises the centre-right's voters who disagree with the policies and rhetoric of the populist right.¹⁰⁷⁹ This has been particularly prevalent in France where the mainstream centre-right parties' tendency to imitate populist right-wing rhetoric and policy has isolated its more centrist voters, causing many to switch party allegiance. For example, 24% of voters who had supported LR candidate Valérie Pécresse in the 2022 presidential election, switched to support French President Emmanuel Macron's *Ensemble* in the

1078. Andrew McDonald, "London Playbook PM: Starmer's Rome love-in",

<https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/london-playbook/london-playbook-pm-starmer-rome-love-in/> (2024).

1079. Bartek Staniszewski, "A party without a clear philosophy is not going to win votes – just look around Europe", <https://conservativehome.com/2025/03/20/bartek-staniszewski-a-party-without-a-clear-philosophy-is-not-going-to-win-votes-just-look-around-europe/> (2025).

2024 legislative election.¹⁰⁸⁰ While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons for these changes of allegiance, LR's shift rightwards under Ciotti undoubtedly played a role. This has greatly contributed to the further fragmentation and weakening of the French centre-right, with many of its former voters now scattered across multiple competing centrist alternative parties.

There is an additional problem with imitating a particular aspect of the populist right. The populist right tends to coalesce around charismatic individuals who come to define their respective movements rather than focusing on policies and principles. Examples include Marine Le Pen, who has come to largely define the French populist right under her leadership of *Rassemblement national*, even as her rhetoric has moderated in an attempt to win over less radical voters;¹⁰⁸¹ or Nigel Farage, who has become the rallying point for the UK populist right under his various political outfits, including the UK Independence Party, the Brexit Party and Reform UK.¹⁰⁸² While effective for an insurgent populist movement, this political strategy is unsustainable for centre-right parties aiming for long-term success in government. Besides the obvious problem that an individual's political career always eventually ends – while the centre-right should be looking to remain a leading political force for the long term – movements focused on a single figure are also particularly vulnerable to shocks and scandals. Individual personalities are difficult to control and can easily veer from popularity to unpopularity.

A good example of this is the former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson – who was populist in rhetoric but centre-right in policymaking – whose likeability in public polls dropped from a net of +29% in April 2020 to -23% by February 2022¹⁰⁸³ as a result of his involvement in

1080. Ipsos, "Sociologie des électors – Législatives 2024",

<https://www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/legislatives-2024/sociologie-des-electorats-legislatives-2024> (2024).

1081. Nicholas Vinocur, "How Le Pen turned respectable (and why you shouldn't be fooled)", <https://www.politico.eu/article/marine-le-pen-turned-respectable-france-presidential-election/> (2024).

1082. James Kirkup, "Nigel Farage's left-wing turn looks like a triumph", <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/nigel-farages-left-wing-turn-looks-like-a-triumph/> (2025).

1083. YouGov, "Boris Johnson likeability", <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/is-boris-johnson-likeable> (2025).

a series of scandals, including ‘Partygate’ and ‘Pinchergate.’¹⁰⁸⁴ Being associated with scandals is particularly damaging for the centre-right, which relies on a perception of reliability and competence with voters.

Given the clear shortcomings of these attempted solutions, this report’s final Chapter offers a third way to combat the ascendancy of right-wing populism: namely, the need for the centre-right to outline a more distinctive and attractive policy prospectus.

Lack of a unclear differentiation from a left-wing alternative

In all of the countries studied in this report, another major problem since at least 1991 has been unclear differentiation from a left-wing alternative. The growth of this challenge can be broken down into three periods which we will address in turn: the collapse of communism in the nineties; the acceptance of centre-right economics ideas by centre-left governments during the nineties and noughties; and the adoption of statist policies by centre-right governments since 2020.

First, prior to 1991, the majority of European centre-rights benefited from the looming threat of communism, as represented by the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. In the context of this serious threat, the centre-right in Europe became representative of what it meant to be on NATO’s side in the Cold War – conservatism and economic liberalism in particular could be contrasted against the aggressive secularism and socialism of the Soviet Union. As such, the centre-right could act as a focal point around which voters could rally and, at least to a certain degree, could frame support for left-wing opponents as tantamount to support for communism itself. One notable exception to this trend is Ireland, as is explained briefly in Box 8.2.

1084. See BBC, “Partygate: A timeline of the lockdown parties”, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-59952395> (2023); and The Editor, “The Guardian view on the cabinet resignations: endgame for Boris Johnson”, *The Guardian*, 5 July 2022 for details.

Box 8.2. The Irish exception

During the Cold War, Ireland stayed neutral, remaining outside NATO and part of the unaligned ‘third world.’ As such, the Soviet Union never represented the same existential threat as elsewhere in Europe. Indeed, for most of its modern history, Irish politics has been marked by the notable lack of a viable social democratic party. Ireland’s centre-right was therefore able to achieve electoral dominance without a clear philosophical opponent on the centre-left. This counter-example can be explained by the unique nature of Irish politics regarding the division between its two centre right parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. As explained in Chapter Seven, both parties have their roots in support for opposing sides in the Irish Civil War (1922-23), which followed the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. These civil war divisions persisted in Irish politics until the eighties and nineties. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were therefore able to evoke the legacy of civil war division as a rallying point for voters in a manner not dissimilar to centre-right parties’ mobilisation of the communist threat elsewhere in Europe.

However, just as with the collapse of communism, this centre-right advantage had all but disappeared by the late twentieth century. With the passing of generations and the fragmentation of the Irish political landscape – Civil War divisions lost their central role in deciding voter alignment. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael can therefore no longer rely on this dividing line as a focal point and have begun to suffer from the blurring of lines between the centre-right and centre-left in terms of policy.

The powerful effect of the ability to rally around opposition to an uncontroversial philosophical opponent is most clearly illustrated by the example of Poland. The centre-right party *Komitet Obywatelski „Solidarność”* (KOS) served in 1989 as the rallying point for all voters who were opposed to communism and the influence that the Soviet Union continued to have on Poland. Consequently, months after being elected, the first Polish centre-right Government since the Second World War was supported by an astounding 90% of the Polish

public.¹⁰⁸⁵ However, following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the dissolution of the Polish communist party (PZPR) in 1990, the threat of communism no longer loomed so large and support for the centre-right among the Polish public declined. Non-centre-right parties wound up controlling over two-thirds of seats in the Polish parliament in 1993.

The example of Poland is illustrative of a broader point: rather than marking a lasting triumph for the centre-right, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 – and its disappearance as a left-wing threat – actually began to undermine centre-right parties’ ability to win votes.

As Francis Fukuyama famously wrote in 1992, the victory of the West’s centrist liberalism was to be the “end of history” – the triumph of a political philosophy so completely dominant that, Fukuyama supposed, once every country in the world adopts it, there will be no more major ideological shifts in world politics.¹⁰⁸⁶ Fukuyama’s prediction of a new era of global political consensus has since been widely criticised. Indeed, between 2011 and 2021, every single European country except Iceland has experienced either worsened or unchanged political polarisation, as defined by V-Dem Institute’s ‘Political Polarization’ index, which measures the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions.¹⁰⁸⁷

However, Fukuyama’s predictions have proven to be much more accurate within the bounds of centrist politics, where growing consensus in the post-communist era has made it much harder for the centre-right to distinguish itself economically from its traditional philosophical opponents on the centre-left. In the nineties and noughties, centre-left parties increasingly began to adopt the liberal economic policies that they had once fervently opposed. The preponderance of centre-right economic ideas was manifested in the politics of the “Third Way”,

1085. Piotr Wróbel, “Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989–2004”, in Mieczysław Biskupski, James Pula and Piotr Wróbel (eds.), *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 319.

1086. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

1087. Vanessa Boese et al., “State of the world 2021: autocratization changing its nature?”, *Democratization* (2022), 983–1013.

a movement among centre-left parties that attempted to reconcile economic liberalism with their traditional social democratic policies.

This movement was exemplified by Prime Minister Tony Blair from the UK's Labour Party and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder from Germany's Social Democratic Party. Both leaders explicitly disowned the 'tax and spend' approaches of earlier left-wing governments, instead emphasising tax cuts, fiscal control and greater adherence to free-market principles. The two leaders outlined this policy agenda in a joint manifesto in 1999, titled 'The Third Way/Die Neue Mitte'.¹⁰⁸⁸ While this trend has diminished slightly since the global financial crisis of 2008, many European centre-left parties have retained a liberal economic outlook, at least to a certain degree. One clear example of this is the incumbent Labour Government in the UK, which has prioritised fiscal conservatism and earned numerous comparisons to the austerity programme of centre-right Conservative governments from previous decades.¹⁰⁸⁹

This blurring of lines in centrist politics has worsened further since 2020. After decades of the centre-left moving rightward, centre-right governments were prompted to move leftwards by the unprecedented economic context of the COVID-19 pandemic and then the Europe-wide cost-of-living crisis – triggered in part by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In response to these fiscal challenges, centre-right governments resorted to increasingly statist policies. Explored in more detail later in this Chapter, these policies have included generous redistributive packages to support their populations through the crises, subsequently followed by tax hikes and large-scale state investment programmes designed to restart economic growth. Ireland is a prominent example of this, with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael moving their coalition government noticeably leftwards between 2020 and 2024 through a large-scale

1088. Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, "Europe: The Third Way/Die Neue Mitte", <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/suedafrika/02828.pdf> (1998).

1089. Sammy Gecsoyler, "Thousands join anti-austerity march in London to protest against Labour's cuts", *The Guardian*, 7 June 2025.

redistributive programme of lump-sum payments designed to combat cost-of-living problems, as outlined in Chapter Seven. This transition of centre-right parties and governments towards a high-tax, high-spend policy prospectus has thus further increased the overlap with the centre-left and worsened the problem of under-differentiation.

Since the nineties, the centre-right has tried to combat this problem of under-differentiation in two main ways: re-invoking the extinct left-wing threat; and finding a new cultural threat against which it can rally voters.

Reinvoking the left-wing threat

First, the centre-right has attempted to distinguish itself by re-invoking the extinct threat once posed by left-wing parties. This is again most clearly illustrated with the example of Poland where, although former members of the Polish communist party (PZPR) continued to present a possible threat to Poland in the years after 1991, communism was not the existential threat that it was in the years prior, as by then communists lost control over the government in both Poland and Russia. Nevertheless, Polish politics continues to be rife with accusations of politicians being communist agents – a tactic commonly employed by both the Polish centre-right and populists. Accusations of working for communists have been, in recent years, levied against multiple PiS politicians, including Jarosław Kaczyński,¹⁰⁹⁰ with one – Kazimierz Kujda¹⁰⁹¹ – even making the admission himself. On the other hand, PiS politicians have consistently accused Donald Tusk and his allies, as well as Polish academia, diplomatic corps, judiciary and civil

1090. Grzegorz Rzeczkowski, "Gdzie jest agentura? Ponury obraz tego, jak ludzie Kremla podchodzili PiS", <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/polityka/rosja-w-pis-czy-w-pis-istnieje-rosyjska-agentura-problem-na-pewno-jest/5h9eln> (2022); Donata Subbotko, "Gen. Janusz Nosek: PiS jest przesiąknięty agenturą rosyjską", <https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,29771638,gen-janusz-nosek-pis-jest-przesiakniety-agentura-rosyjska.html> (2023); WP Wiadomości, "Akcja "Piotrowicze". Kto z PiS należał do PZPR?", <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/akcja-piotrowicze-kto-z-pis-nalezal-do-pzpr-6067060569051777a> (2016);

Cezary Michalski, "Komuniści i agenci Kaczyńskiego", <https://www.newsweek.pl/prezes-pis-i-jego-zaufani-ludzie-komunisci-i-agenci/p7m5jc4> (2019).

1091. Gazeta Wyborcza, "Agent służb u boku Kaczyńskiego. Trzęsienie ziemi w PiS", <https://www.fakt.pl/polityka/agent-sluzb-u-boku-kaczynskiego-trzesienie-ziemi-w-pis/kpny3gk> (2019).

service of cooperation with Russian communists or even continually being communist agents.¹⁰⁹²

The tactic has proven unpopular with the Polish public, which generally disapproves of the attempts at exposing former communists – lustration – as discussed in the earlier relevant Chapter. Moreover, this tactic is largely unavailable to politicians in most other European countries where the threat of communism has never been as serious as it had been in Poland.

Though accusations of communism are few and far between, Conservatives in the UK have also attempted to weaponise left-wing history through the threat of a milder version of socialism associated with the stagnation experienced during the seventies. In this period, the Labour Governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan presided over mounting inflation, frequent strikes and economic difficulties that undermined public confidence in state intervention. This period has since been symbolised by the cultural memory of the 1978-79 ‘Winter of Discontent’, when widespread industrial action and social unrest saw a significant disruption across the UK’s public services.¹⁰⁹³ The Conservative Party often attempts to use this legacy to accuse Labour of being a high spend and high tax party that cannot be trusted.¹⁰⁹⁴ However, given Conservatives’ own poor growth record in the past decade, such attacks have rarely held much credibility.

Finding a new cultural threat

In the context of growing convergence with the centre-left on economic policy, parties of the centre-right have increasingly sought to

1092. Krzysztof Świątek, “Marek Suski: ci, którzy obalili rząd Jana Olszewskiego, są przeciwko PiS”, <https://polskieradio24.pl/artukul/2320179,marek-suski-ci-ktorzy-obalili-rzad-jana-olszewskiego-sa-przeciwko-pis> (2019); Marcin Bosacki, “PiS weryfikuje polskich dyplomatów”, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/1698986,1,pis-weryfikuje-polskich-dyplomatow.read> (2017); Tomasz Lis, “Sienkiewicz: propaganda PiS twierdzi, że walcząc z sędziami, walczy z komunizmem”, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/sienkiewicz-propaganda-pis-twierdzi-ze-walczac-z-sedziami-walczy-z-komunizmem/7r0ej0c> (2020).

1093. Colin Hay, “Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the ‘Winter of Discontent’”, *Sociology* (1996), 253-277.

1094. For example, see: Rowena Mason, “Labour will take Britain back to ‘nasty 1970s’, says Boris Johnson”, *The Guardian*, 31 March 2015.

differentiate themselves through cultural policy. With this in mind, the centre-right has focused on targeting the left in two particular areas: multiculturalism and ‘wokeism.’

First, since 2010, European centre-right parties and politicians have tried to set themselves apart from the centre-left by focusing on the threat of failed multiculturalism, associating progressive parties with social separatism, while positioning themselves as champions of national cohesion through assimilation. This strategy was evidenced, among others, by speeches made by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and UK Prime Minister David Cameron, in 2010 and 2011 respectively, both of whom declared that the progressive experiment of multiculturalism had been a resounding failure.¹⁰⁹⁵

In France, the failure of multiculturalism – referred to as *communautarisme* – has been a major talking point for the French centre-right in recent years, especially with regard to the dangers of Islamist separatism. This has a particular relevance in France due to several instances of Islamic terrorism in recent decades, most notably in the Paris attacks of November 2015 where 130 people were killed and more than 350 injured. In response, the French centre-right has increasingly leant into the idea of Islamism and Islamic separatism as a major threat to France’s security, republican values and social cohesion. As detailed in Chapter Four, LR in particular has dedicated much of its political capital to policy debates on relevant cultural issues such as *laïcité* and advocating stricter regulation on wearing religious symbols in public. However, the present decline of LR in the face of the resurgent RN exemplifies the shortcomings of this approach, namely that mobilising such cultural debates has, in most cases, done more to help the momentum of the populist right than the centre-right, as discussed earlier.

Another such attempt has been made, more recently, with the so-

1095. Matthew Weaver, “Angela Merkel: German multiculturalism has ‘utterly failed’”, *The Guardian*, 17 October 2010; BBC, “State multiculturalism has failed, says David Cameron”, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994> (2011).

called ‘woke’ ideology, which centre-right actors have framed as a distinctly progressive, left-wing agenda. Again, France provides a pertinent example of this, where elements of the centre-right have built up ‘*le wokisme*’ as a cultural bogeyman, framing it as a disruptive, leftist American import that promotes divisive identity politics, contradicts the principles of *laïcité*, and, as such, threatens the fabric of French society.¹⁰⁹⁶

A further attempt was made by the leader of the UK Conservative Party, Kemi Badenoch. She was elected in November 2024 as leader against a background of championing anti-woke rhetoric, with her criticising “woke ideologies” as left-wing opponents of Western liberalism¹⁰⁹⁷ and self-describing as “anti-woke”¹⁰⁹⁸ and a “culture warrior”.¹⁰⁹⁹ This approach, however, has so far failed to capture the UK electorate. Her net approval among the UK public since her election as leader has fallen from -9% to -35% at the time of writing.¹¹⁰⁰ Indeed, polling has shown that ‘woke’ rarely features among voters’ top political concerns as is almost always considered by voters secondary in importance to economic policies.¹¹⁰¹ For example, 2024 Bright Blue polling found that policies on issues of ‘woke’ are considered by the British public to be the least appealing for young voters when compared to policies on housing, education, tax or family.¹¹⁰²

Attempts to rally voters against the centre-left through the lenses of multiculturalism and ‘wokeism’ therefore suffer from two major problems. First – and particularly with regard to ‘wokeism’ – is the

1096. For example, see: Jean-loup Bonnamy, “Le wokisme est une secte politique”, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/culture/jean-loup-bonnamy-le-wokisme-est-une-secte-politique-20220105> (2022).

1097. Daniel Martin, “Badenoch: Western liberalism has been ‘hacked’ by woke ideologies”, *The Telegraph*, 6 December 2024.

1098. Claudia Cockerell, “How Kemi Badenoch became an anti-woke warrior”, <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/kemi-badenoch-conservative-party-leader-origin-political-views-anti-woke-b1192078.html> (2024).

1099. Chas Geiger, “I love being a culture warrior, says Tory leader Badenoch”,

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd75n1jlv2eo> (2024).

1100. YouGov, “Opposition leader performance”,

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/opposition-leader-performance> (2025).

1101. Aletha Adu, “UK voters frustrated with politicians’ ‘desperate’ culture war tactics, survey finds”, *The Guardian*, 21 April 2024.

1102. Bartek Staniszewski, “Public attitudes towards the plight of and policies for younger people”, Bright Blue, <https://www.brightblue.org.uk/public-attitudes-younger-people/> (2024).

simple reality that in many European countries, not enough people are sufficiently bothered for these issues to mobilise voters on a significant scale. Second, is the fact that even for those who are concerned with ‘wokeism’ or the failures of multiculturalism, the centre-right is not the obvious outlet for these sentiments, and as such is fighting on terrain that is far more favourable to the populist right.

Conversely, the economy represents the policy area that people care about most and where the centre-right can feasibly be seen as the most successful. But there is less differentiation between the centre-left and the centre-right on economic policy in recent decades. Indeed, as detailed below, a poor economic record in recent decades has greatly undermined the centre-right’s political capital in this domain.

Poor economic record in recent times

Across Europe, the centre-right’s tarnished economic record has proven to be a major challenge to its political success in recent years. In most instances this is due to centre-right governments underdelivering on economic growth. However, it also links to basic economic competency. Indeed the Irish centre-right – which has presided over an average annual GDP growth rate of almost 6% between 1996 and 2025 – nevertheless suffered long-term political consequences from its loss of economic credibility during the period following the 2008 global financial crisis when it surrendered economic controls to the ‘Troika’ of the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the Eurogroup to impose fiscal consolidation and reassure international lenders and markets. Of the countries studied in this report, the one exception is Poland, which avoided recession during the global financial crisis in 2008 and continues to see strong annual growth to this day.¹¹⁰³

One of the key advantages that the European centre-right has had to offer in the post-war period is its good record on economic management.

1103. World Bank, “GDP growth (annual %)”, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG> (2025).

Centre-right governments in the UK, Germany, France and Ireland have presided over superior growth than centre-left governments. Under centre-right majority governments, annual economic growth in the years 1961 to 2023 has averaged 3.4% in France, 5.6% in Ireland and 2.5% in the UK, although, as will be explained later, this was achieved much more prior to 2007, as can be seen in Table 8.1 below.¹¹⁰⁴ Germany, in that period, has not seen any centre-right majority government, but German coalitions that included the centre-right averaged 2.4% annual growth. Conversely, under governments that excluded the centre-right – or, in the case of Ireland, where the centre-right did not control a parliamentary majority – annual economic growth in the years 1961 to 2023 has averaged 1.7% in France, 4.1% in Ireland, 2.1% in the UK and 2.0% in Germany, as visible in Table 8.1 below.¹¹⁰⁵

1104. We forgo conducting the same analysis for Poland because reliable pre-1990 figures for Polish GDP are unavailable. With that said, Polish GDP per capita actually declined between 1975 and 1989 – a period during which centre-right government was effectively illegal in Poland – while, between 1990 and 2025, it has increased thirteen-fold. See Artur Domurat and Anna Zajenkowska, “Confucian and Protestant work ethics among Polish and Korean employees and small business owners”, *Journal of Intercultural Communications* (2012).

1105. World Bank, “GDP growth (annual %)”, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG> (2025).

Table 8.1. The relationship between the centre-right and economic growth

	Average annual GDP per capita growth between 1961 and 2023	Average annual GDP per capita growth under centre-right governments between 1961 and 2023	Average annual GDP per capita growth between non-centre-right governments between 1961 and 2023	Average annual GDP growth between 1961 and 2023	Average annual GDP growth under centre-right governments between 1961 and 2023	Average annual GDP growth under non-centre-right governments between 1961 and 2023	Difference between global and local annual economic GDP growth under centre-right governments between 1961 and 2023	Difference between global and local annual economic GDP growth under non-centre-right governments between 1961 and 2023	Average annual GDP growth under centre-right governments since 2007	Average annual GDP growth under centre-right governments before 2007
France	+2.1%	+2.7%	+1.2%	+2.7%	+3.4%	+1.7%	-0.5%	-1.0%	+0.8%	+3.9%
Ireland	+3.9%	+4.4%	+3.2%	+5.0%	+5.6%	+4.1%	+1.9%	+1.0%	+5.8%	+5.4%
UK	+1.9%	+2.1%	+1.7%	+2.3%	+2.5%	+2.1%	-0.9%	-1.5%	+1.5%	+2.8%
Germany*	+2.0%	+2.1%	+1.9%	+2.3%	+2.4%	+2.0%	-1.1%	-1.4%	+1.2%	+3.1%

Source: World Bank, "GDP growth (annual %)", [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NYGDPMKTRKDG](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NYGDPMKTRKDG?locations=GB) (2025); World Bank, "GDP per capita growth (annual %)", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NYGDPCAKDZG> (2025).

For Germany, by 'centre-right government,' we mean a government that involved the centre-right, as opposed to other countries, where we mean 'majority centre-right government.' Furthermore, we consider Germany to be a successor state of West Germany but not East Germany, since centre-right government was impossible in East Germany for reasons similar to Poland's.

The same holds true even after we adjust for global economic growth.¹¹⁰⁶ Under centre-right majority governments, the difference between annual economic growth globally and locally in each respective country in the years 1961 to 2023 has averaged -0.5% in France, +1.9% in Ireland and -0.9% in the UK; while, in Germany, under coalitions including the centre-right, it averaged -1.1%. Conversely, under governments that excluded the centre-right, the difference in the years 1961 to 2023 has averaged -1.0% in France, +1.0% in Ireland, -1.5% in the UK and -1.4% in Germany.¹¹⁰⁷ As such, it is not merely that the centre-right governs in periods of good global economic growth; it seems that the centre-right is better at delivering growth as compared to the global economic outlook. One other possible explanation is that non-centre-right governments could be more likely to preside over periods when successful economic policy is more difficult, but there is *prima facie* no reason to suppose this.

Finally, this is not merely about increasing populations driving growth; a similar trend still holds true when we look at GDP per capita. In the same 1961 to 2023 period, French, Irish, British and German annual GDP per capita growth averaged 2.7%, 4.4%, 2.1% and 2.1% respectively under centre-right governments (coalitions involving the centre-right in the case of Germany); and only 1.2%, 3.2%, 1.7% and 1.9% under non-centre-right governments in the same countries respectively.¹¹⁰⁸ Again, the higher levels were achieved in the earlier years of this long period, as explained below.

Once we look at how centre-right governments have performed economically since 2007, their record is much less impressive – though, admittedly, the sample size is small. Annual economic growth under centre-right governments has since then averaged 0.8% in France, 5.8% in Ireland and 1.5% in the UK, while, in Germany, under coalitions

1106. World Bank, “GDP growth (annual %)”, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2023&start=1961&view=chart> (2025).

1107. World Bank, “GDP growth (annual %)”, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG> (2025).

1108. World Bank, “GDP per capita growth (annual %)”, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG> (2025).

involving the centre-right, it has averaged 1.2%. This represents a substantial decrease in the ability to preside over economic growth in all of them except Ireland, amounting to 2.6 percentage points in France, one percentage point in the UK and 1.2 percentage points in Germany.¹¹⁰⁹ This difference is even more pronounced if we compare the centre-right's ability to drive growth before 2007 to its ability to drive growth after 2007, as can be seen in Table 8.1 above.

That is not to say that the non-centre-right has presided over good economic growth since 2007, but the inability to deliver strong growth is a unique disadvantage for the centre-right which has traditionally attracted voters precisely on the promise of a prosperous, well-managed economy. Indeed, this is one of the key reasons why voters have reliably turned out for the centre-right. Across multiple studies, centre-right parties across different countries tend to be ranked better than their rivals in questions pertaining to a government's stewardship over the economy. In Germany, for example, the centre-right CDU/CSU is generally considered more competent on the economy than the parties of the German centre-left, even when their polling numbers are worse overall, with polling numbers since at least 2017 supporting this.¹¹¹⁰ Likewise, across 61 Ipsos studies of UK respondents between 1990 and 2023, 42 found that the centre-right Conservative Party was perceived to have the best policies on managing the economy¹¹¹¹ – though it is worth noting that other studies have found less consistent results.¹¹¹²

The reasons for this recent poor economic performance of European countries are multiple; we detail just a few here. European governments do relatively less to encourage risk and entrepreneurship than other

1109. World Bank, "GDP growth (annual %)", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG> (2025).

1110. Kristian Frigelj, "SPD zieht davon, Union versinkt in historischem Tief, Grüne abgeschlagen", <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article233540366/Deutschlandtrend-SPD-zieht-davon-Union-versinkt-in-historischem-Tief.html> (2021); Statista, "Which party do you think is the most competent when it comes to the economy?", <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1535911/party-competence-economy-germany/> (2025);

Rebecca Staudenmaier and Sabine Kinkartz, "Satisfaction in German government plummets", <https://www.dw.com/en/satisfaction-in-german-government-plummets/a-66690143> (2023).

1111. Ipsos, "Best Party On Key Issues: Managing the Economy", <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/best-party-key-issues-managing-economy> (2023).

1112. For example see: Jane Green and Will Jennings, *The Politics of Competence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

countries. This can be seen, for example, when we look at the number of companies valued at over one trillion dollars in the US and Europe. While the US has eight such companies, seven of which were founded in the last 50 years, Europe has none. Indeed, Europe's most valuable company, the German software company SAP SE, is valued at barely over a quarter of a trillion dollars and was founded in 1972. To promote competition, European governments have favoured blocking mergers, hence harming European economies' external economies of scale – a reduction in costs of all firms in a sector caused by the presence of a large firm within a market – over lowering barriers to entry, which would increase competition from new entrants.¹¹¹³

The relatively unfavourable nature of the European environment for investment is evidenced by the fact that, in 2024, funding for Europe-based start-ups amounted to \$51 billion; a decrease of 5% as compared to 2023.¹¹¹⁴ By comparison, in the US and Canada, this totalled \$184 billion, an increase of 21% on 2023.¹¹¹⁵ This is despite the total size of the European economy being only 17% smaller than the combined size of the US and Canadian economies in nominal terms.¹¹¹⁶ Across the EU, total research and development (R&D) investment reached 235 billion Euros in 2023; just over half of what it amounted to in the US that same year (532 billion Euros).¹¹¹⁷

Overly cautious culture is also present in some large European financial institutions. For example, in 2023, 56% of total UK pension asset allocation is in bonds – a very low-risk investment – while US and Australian pension funds have had 47% and 51% of their investment

1113. David Lawrence et al., "Rediscovering British Progress", <https://britishprogress.org/articles/rediscovering-british-progress> (2025); Andrew McAfee, "European Competitiveness, and How Not to Fix It", <https://geekway.substack.com/p/european-competitiveness-and-how> (2024).

1114. Gené Teare, "Europe's Startup Funding Stabilized In 2024, But Remains Far Off Market Peak", <https://news.crunchbase.com/venture/europe-startup-funding-eoy-2024/> (2025).

1115. Joanna Glasner, "North American startup funding spikes to close 2024", <https://news.crunchbase.com/venture/north-american-startup-funding-ai-eoy-2024/> (2025).

1116. International Monetary Fund, "GDP, current prices", <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/> NGDPD@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOORLD (2025).

1117. European Commission, "The 2024 EU industrial R&D investment scoreboard", <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC140129> (2024).

in equities, respectively – much higher-risk investments.¹¹¹⁸ Moreover, whereas Australian and Canadian pension funds allocate 5% and 6% of their assets into unlisted equities, in the UK that number was less than 1%.¹¹¹⁹ Consequently, according to a 2020 report by the Thinking Ahead Institute, European pension funds have averaged annual growth rates of only 2.8% between 2014 and 2019. This is as compared to 5.1% in North America and 7.0% in Asia.¹¹²⁰ This means that Europeans are multiple tens of thousands of dollars worse off by the time they retire than North Americans or Asians who invested the same sum into their pension pots with the same regularity.¹¹²¹ It also has a direct impact on economic growth by reducing the capacity for promising start-ups to attract the funding they need to upscale. Partly as a consequence of this, a growing number of European start-ups are shifting to the United States, where start-up capital is much easier to obtain – whereas UK start-ups raised £16.2 billion in 2024, those based in Silicon Valley raised £65 billion¹¹²² despite the UK's GDP being roughly four times higher than Silicon Valley's and the UK being the best performing country in Europe in that respect.

Connected to this excessive caution is the fact that both the UK and the EU suffer economically from excessive levels of regulation. A 2019 Centre for Policy Studies report found that 3,528 new regulatory laws passed in the UK between 2010 and 2019 alone have incurred a cost on businesses of between £6 and £35 billion – the latter of which is equivalent to a ten percentage point increase in corporation tax.¹¹²³ This happened despite the centre-right Conservative Party having promised

1118. Thinking Ahead Institute, "Global pension assets study", <https://www.thinkingaheadinstitute.org/research-papers/global-pension-assets-study-2023/> (2023).

1119. Djuna Thurley and James Mirza-Davies, "Pension scheme investments", <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10146/CBP-10146.pdf> (2024), 18.

1120. Thinking Ahead Institute, "Global top 300 pension funds", https://www.thinkingaheadinstitute.org/content/uploads/2020/11/TAI_PI300_2020.pdf (2020).

1121. Zachary Spiro, "Pension power", <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Pensions-Final-PM.pdf> (2023), 30.

1122. Kieran Smith and Cristina Criddle, "UK start-ups consider switch to US as funding falls to post-pandemic low", *Financial Times*, 13 April 2015.

1123. Tom Clougherty and Robert Colvile, "The Future of Regulation", <https://cps.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/The-Future-of-Regulation-FINAL.pdf> (2024).

in its 2010 manifesto to reduce the regulatory burden and having removed or amended 3,000 regulations costing businesses £850 million a year within the same period, suggesting that the created regulatory burden is even worse under most other governments.¹¹²⁴

Across the EU, too, the regulatory burden is so high that, despite the existence of the EU single market which guarantees the free movement of goods and services, only 25% of large businesses and less than 10% of SMEs offer cross-border online sales within the EU.¹¹²⁵ For example, the General Data Protection Regulation alone, introduced in the EU in 2018, is estimated to have reduced average business profits by 8% and sales by 2%, most of which was borne by SMEs; and this is but one of thousands of regulatory legislations active in the EU.¹¹²⁶ Similarly the Munich-based ifo Institute estimated that excessive bureaucracy, which includes but is not limited to slow administrative processes as well as stringent data protection and reporting rules, costs Germany “up to 146 billion euros a year in lost economic output.”¹¹²⁷ Indeed, according to a number of studies, including a 2019 paper commissioned by the European Central Bank, excessive regulation is the key reason for the productivity gap between the EU and the US, which amounts to around 23% as of 2023 – Americans produce on average \$97.05 per hour, while EU residents produce around \$76.02 per hour in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms.¹¹²⁸ In general, R&D spending – which is crucial to productivity growth – is far higher in the US than in Europe, and this is

1124. Ibid.

1125. Judith Arnal and Enrique Feás, “Competitiveness: the widening gap between the EU and the US”, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/competitiveness-the-widening-gap-between-the-eu-and-the-us/> (2024).

1126. Giorgio Presidente and Carl Benedikt Frey, “The GDPR effect: How data privacy regulation shaped firm performance globally”, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/gdpr-effect-how-data-privacy-regulation-shaped-firm-performance-globally> (2022).

1127. “Bureaucracy in Germany Costs 146 Billion Euros a Year in Lost Economic Output”, ifo Institute, <https://www.ifo.de/en/press-release/2024-11-14/bureaucracy-germany-costs-146-billion-euros-year-lost-economic-output> (2024).

1128. “Productivity levels”, OECD, [https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?fs\[0\]=Topic%2C1%7CEconomy%23ECO%23%7CProductivity%23ECO_PRO%23&pg=0&fc=Topic&bp=true&snb=6&vw=tb&df\[ds\]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df\[id\]=DSD_PDB%40DF_PDB_IV&df\[ag\]=OECD.SDD.TPS&df\[vs\]=1.0&q=USA%2BEU27_2020.A.GDPHRS.....&pd=1995%2C2024&to\[TIME_PERIOD\]=false](https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?fs[0]=Topic%2C1%7CEconomy%23ECO%23%7CProductivity%23ECO_PRO%23&pg=0&fc=Topic&bp=true&snb=6&vw=tb&df[ds]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df[id]=DSD_PDB%40DF_PDB_IV&df[ag]=OECD.SDD.TPS&df[vs]=1.0&q=USA%2BEU27_2020.A.GDPHRS.....&pd=1995%2C2024&to[TIME_PERIOD]=false) (2025).

entirely due to the difference in R&D spending within the private sector. While R&D spending amounts to 3.5% of GDP in the US and 2.3% in the EU, public sector spending on R&D in the EU amounts to 0.74% of the GDP, as compared to 0.69% in the US.¹¹²⁹

Electricity prices in Europe, too, are some of the highest in the world. In 2023, all the countries studied in this report paid, on average, consumers 19.9 pence per kWh of energy before taxes and 20.5 pence after taxes. By comparison, in 2023 in the US, electricity cost 6.5 pence per kWh after taxes.¹¹³⁰

Underlying all this is Europe's poor productivity. Between 1998 and 2023, productivity across the EU has grown by 119% as compared to 162% in the US. According to the 2024 Draghi report, "[o]n this trajectory [of productivity growth, GDP] growth in Europe will stall" and European GDP may even decline after 2050.¹¹³¹

The centre-right's inability to deliver economic growth has had a number of wider effects. As explored earlier in this Chapter, declining or stagnating living standards is one of the factors behind the rise of populism in Europe. Economic growth is crucial for countering this challenge. Indeed, if one wants to decrease taxes without decreasing government expenditure – or to increase government expenditure without raising taxes – economic growth is an essential prerequisite lest one increases levels of public borrowing.¹¹³² Given that tax hikes, decreasing government spending and higher public borrowing are all either difficult, unpopular or both, they are generally undesirable. As such, without growth, it is very difficult for governments to pull almost any policy levers.

Indeed, incumbent centre-right governments missed a significant

1129. Pieter Garciano, "The Problem Isn't Public R&D", <https://www.siliconcontinent.com/p/the-problem-isnt-public-r-and-d> (2024).

1130. Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, "International industrial energy prices", <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/international-industrial-energy-prices> (2025).

1131. Andrew McAfee, "European Competitiveness, and How Not to Fix It", <https://geekway.substack.com/p/european-competitiveness-and-how> (2024).

1132. Bartek Staniszewski, "The centre-right is still our best bet for prosperity", <https://capx.co/the-centre-right-is-still-our-best-bet-for-prosperity> (2025).

opportunity to boost economic growth rates by increasing public investment during the period of exceptionally low interest rates between 2016 and 2019, which followed years of fiscal retrenchment after the global financial crisis.¹¹³³ Despite historically low borrowing costs – European Central Bank fixed interest rates were at 0.00% from March 2016 until July 2022 – many governments were reluctant to expand capital investment and prioritised fiscal discipline instead, thus missing an opportunity to fund growth-enhancing projects at minimal cost.¹¹³⁴ When Russia's invasion of Ukraine – combined with the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic – created a far more challenging fiscal environment, centre-right governments then shifted towards a more statist programme of higher spending, taxation and borrowing, albeit under much less favourable economic conditions, with rising inflation and higher interest rates eroding the benefits of fiscal expansion.

Struggling European countries have attempted multiple solutions to boost economic growth and raise living standards. These strategies can broadly be split into two: large-scale state investment plans and drastic tax cuts, both of which are supported predominantly through new borrowing. France offers a clear example of the former with President Macron's €100 billion *'France Relance'* programme. This recovery package was four times larger than the one introduced after the 2008 financial crisis, and only €40 billion of its total came from EU relief funds – the remaining €60 billion representing new borrowing.¹¹³⁵ More dramatic still has been Chancellor Merz's historic decision to lift Germany's debt brake and support German industry through a €500 billion fund for infrastructure and green energy.¹¹³⁶

1133. For example, see: Maria Demertzis and Nicola Viegi, "Low interest rates in Europe and the US: one trend, two stories", https://www.bruegel.org/system/files/wp_attachments/PC-07-2021.pdf (2021).

1134. Statista, "Fluctuation of the European Central Bank fixed interest rate from 2008 to 2025", <https://www.statista.com/statistics/621489/fluctuation-of-fixed-rate-interest-rates-ecb/> (2025).

1135. Thomas Manz, "Can Macron's 'France Relance' rebuild the country?", <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/future-of-social-democracy/can-macrons-france-relance-rebuild-the-country-4662/> (2020).

1136. Hans von der Burchard et al., "Germany's big spending splurge gives EU the jitters", <https://www.politico.eu/article/germanys-friedrich-merz-radical-spending-election-berlin-green-energy-fund/> (2025).

Elsewhere, European centre-right leaders have opted to seek growth through drastic tax cuts. Merz provides an example of this strategy, having recently approved a €46 billion corporate tax break designed to revive Germany's sluggish economy until 2029.¹¹³⁷ However, the most notable – indeed, infamous – example of this approach is UK Prime Minister Liz Truss, whose disastrous 2022 ‘mini-budget’ caused markets to panic and sterling to slump, after promising the UK's biggest tax cuts since 1972 funded by massive increase in public borrowing.¹¹³⁸ The long-term impacts of some of these interventions have not yet been fully realised, but there are good reasons to think that they will be insufficient for European growth to reach its former heights – or even to match growth in the US in the long-term, a country with an economy structured relatively similarly to many western European countries yet experiencing consistently stronger growth in recent years, even accounting for the current US President Donald Trump's tariffs weakening the US economy relative to the European economy – indeed, the tariffs will also have a negative effect on European economies. Policies seeking to improve European economic growth must address their own underlying blockers.

As indicated above, both Poland and Ireland represent outliers regarding the poor economic performance of European countries in recent decades. However, it is important to recognise that both have benefited from somewhat unique circumstances or approaches which it is difficult for other centre-right governments to replicate.

First, Poland has continued to see reliably strong growth since and even during the 2008 global financial crisis. This, however, is likely caused by the successful unlocking of Poland's economic potential following the end of communism in Poland. In 1989, when Polish communists lost power, the average Pole earned less than \$50 a month

1137. Maria Martinez, “German cabinet approves \$52 bln corporate tax relief package”, <https://www.reuters.com/en/german-cabinet-approves-46-bln-euro-corporate-tax-relief-package-2025-06-04/> (2025).

1138. Richard Partington, “The mini-budget that broke Britain – and Liz Truss”, *The Guardian*, 20 October 2022.

and was poorer than the average citizen of Gabon or Suriname.¹¹³⁹ Since then, Polish GDP per capita has grown faster than even South Korea and Singapore, the so-called 'Asian Tigers'.¹¹⁴⁰ The only other middle- or high-income countries that experienced superior GDP per capita growth in the period between 1995 and 2015 have been Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, with Slovakia experiencing growth very similar to Poland's; all countries undergoing a post-communist transition within the same period. One reason for this is that all of them were poor. According to the conditional convergence hypothesis, poorer countries should grow faster because of higher returns to scarce capital and larger scope for productivity-enhancing, liberalising structural changes.¹¹⁴¹ In rich countries, the hypothesis supposes, capital is generally less scarce and their economic structure is already conducive to productivity, at least as compared to poorer countries.

Ireland, meanwhile, has achieved remarkable economic growth through a distinctive programme that would be difficult for other European centre-right parties to emulate. Central to Ireland's strategy has been its long-standing policy of maintaining a low corporation tax rate – set at 12.5% since 2003 – which has made the country exceptionally attractive to multinational corporations, particularly in the technology and pharmaceutical sectors. This competitive tax regime has drawn significant FDI and boosted government revenues well beyond what might usually be expected for a country of Ireland's size and population. However, as outlined in Chapter Seven, this model has resulted in an unusually high concentration of corporate tax receipts from a small number of large multinationals, making public finances heavily dependent on the fortunes and strategic decisions of a handful of firms. Indeed, in 2022, over 60% of Ireland's GDP came from value added by a small cohort of foreign-owned non-financial

1139. Marcin Piatkowski, *Europe's growth champion: Insights from the economic rise of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 125–126.

1140. Ibid.

1141. IFT, "Essential concept 18: Convergence hypothesis", <https://ift.world/concept1/level-ii-concept-18-convergence-hypotheses/> (2025).

corporations.¹¹⁴² Likewise, in 2023, over a quarter of Irish tax revenue came from corporate tax receipts,¹¹⁴³ compared to just 9% in the UK during the same period.¹¹⁴⁴ Even discounting the inherent precarity of this system, such an approach is also difficult for other countries to emulate because few, if any, other countries can offer Ireland's unique combination of EU membership, English language, and a pro-business regulatory framework that makes it so attractive for FDI.

Demographic change

In all the European countries we studied, the centre-right is struggling with hitherto unprecedented demographic changes. The nature of those, however, differs across European countries, as do the problems that said changes bring about. In particular, three recent demographic shifts are proving challenging for the centre-right: higher-than-ever levels of immigration; lower-than-ever fertility rates; and highest-in-decades levels of polarisation between men and women.

Immigration

Between 1990 and today, the share of the population that is foreign-born has increased in each of the European countries we studied: in the UK, from 6.4% to 17.1%; in France, from 10.3% to 13.8%; in Germany, from 8.7% to 19.8%; and in Poland, from 3% to 4.5%.¹¹⁴⁵

It is clear that the pace of change has been particularly rapid in the UK and Germany, where the proportion of the population that is foreign-born has increased more than twofold in the last 35 years. Worth noting, however, is that the same problem is present in many other European countries. Spain, for example, has seen the proportion

1142. Central Statistics Office, "Institutional Sector Accounts Non-Financial and Financial 2022", <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-isaff/institutionalsectoraccountsnon-financialandfinancial2022/nfc/> (2023).

1143. Daniel Murray, "Reliance on multinationals a 'significant risk' to economy and public finances", *Business Post*, 20 October 2024.

1144. Matthew Keep, "Tax statistics: an overview", <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8513/> (2024).

1145. Our World in Data, "Share of the population that were born in another country", <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/migrant-stock-share?time=1990> (2025).

change from 2.1% to 18.5% in the same period; Italy from 2.7% to 11%; Norway from 4.5% to 18.2%; Austria from 8.3% to 25.5%; Sweden from 9.2% to 21.4%; and the Netherlands from 7.9% to 16.2%.¹¹⁴⁶

We choose to focus here on the share of foreign-born population, instead of other metrics, deliberately. Other statistics, such as net migration, do not get at the heart of the issue behind immigration – that it facilitates a change in a country’s socio-cultural fabric that may be difficult to accommodate. Although there is some evidence of the economic effects of immigration, they tend to be modest, even at relatively high levels of net migration.¹¹⁴⁷

The share of foreign-born population is the best available proxy for the share of a population that is potentially not yet integrated into a country’s social fabric. Foreign-born residents usually require time to integrate within the country where they reside: to become accustomed to, and eventually a part of, the country’s cultural fabric and a shared set of beliefs, values, customs, behaviours and tastes – what we will refer to, from now on, as the ‘social fabric.’ The process of integration into the social fabric (from now on, just ‘integration’) takes time, although this varies depending on the country of origin of different migrants.

If, at any one time, the share of a country’s population that is not integrated is too high, it often damages the social fabric and produces discontent among voters, particularly non-foreign-born voters, who struggle to accommodate to a society where the social fabric they take for granted is no longer universal, or even changed, challenged or disrespected.

High immigration levels are often correlated with a rise in support for populist parties, a challenge explained earlier.¹¹⁴⁸ However, they also present a particular challenge for non-cosmopolitan and conservative centre-right parties because they are difficult to accommodate together

1146. *Ibid.*

1147. Ryan Shorthouse, “Adding value: A more contributory-based system for skilled migration”, in Will Prescott and Joe Harrison (eds.), “An honest and detailed plan to improve our immigration system” <https://www.brightblue.org.uk/portfolio/a-positive-contribution/> (2025), 28-33, 28.

1148. See e.g. the rise of the AfD in Germany as discussed in Chapter Six of this report.

with a cautiousness about change – insofar as it represents a rapid pace of demographic change – and with a concern for the culture and people local to oneself – insofar as immigrants and their culture are both non-local, at least until they are integrated into the social fabric. Since to be centre-right requires that one is at least one of non-cosmopolitan or conservative, high immigration is always a problem for the centre-right.

For example, in the UK, in the run-up to the 2024 general election, 55% of the public thought that the level of immigration changed for the worse under the centre-right Conservative Government while fewer than 10% thought it changed for the better; under the Conservative Government, the total number of annual arrivals into the UK has more than doubled.¹¹⁴⁹ Over two-thirds of voters for the populist Reform party in the 2025 UK local election also cited immigration policy as their top concern¹¹⁵⁰ and, among Conservative defectors – those who voted Conservative in the 2019 general election but chose not to do so in 2024 – failure to control immigration was the top cited reason after failure “in general;” indeed, it was chosen by over twice as many defectors as “bad economic management”.¹¹⁵¹

Similarly, in Germany, the rise in support for the populist AfD was kickstarted in the aftermath of the backlash against the CDU’s Angela Merkel’s – the German Chancellor between 2005 and 2021 – migration policies. Specifically, her decision in 2015 to allow one million asylum seekers into Germany, many of whom were fleeing conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, caused lasting political damage to the German centre-right, as explicated in Chapter Six. A 2016 poll found that 81% of the German public thought that Merkel’s Government was not handling the issue of migration well, with support for Merkel dropping from

1149. Callum May and Tom McArthur, “Net migration to UK fell 10% last year, ONS say”, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ce99y7l741po> (2024).

1150. Dominic Penna, “Voters backing Reform because of immigration, poll finds”, *The Telegraph*, 29 April 2025.

1151. Electoral Calculus “Conservative Defector Poll June 2024”, https://www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/blogs/ec_condef_20240606.html (2024).

75% in April 2015 to just 46% in February 2016.¹¹⁵² In the subsequent federal election, in 2017, AfD went from 0 to 94 seats, while the centre-right lost 65 seats.

Indeed, centre-right parties across Europe have often promised to cap or reduce immigration levels when in government; a promise that they often failed to deliver on, aggravating the problem. For example, in 2010, the Conservative leader David Cameron promised to cut net immigration to the “tens of thousands” from a level of 252,000 yearly. However, by the time of the next general election in 2015, net migration increased to 379,000 to reach a peak of 906,000 in 2023.¹¹⁵³ Likewise, in 1995, the French President Jacques Chirac promised to tighten immigration controls in France,¹¹⁵⁴ yet, by the time Chirac stepped down as President, the annual number of migrants arriving into France had increased from 106,000 in 1995 to 200,000 in 2007.¹¹⁵⁵

Successful examples of policies that have significantly reduced overall immigration to levels lower than what has already been seen in recent years are very scarce. This is because the main drivers of migration levels are generally geopolitical and economic circumstances, not policy levers. Academic studies generally agree that the impact of public policy on overall immigration levels is limited, especially as compared to the other factors that influence migration levels. For example, a 2009 study that examined 19 Western countries’ tightening of asylum access policies between 2001 and 2006 found that they only accounted for a third of the reduction in the overall number of asylum claimants in that period, with two-thirds of the reduction instead being accountable to external factors, such as the political and economic situation in the countries that the migrants are arriving from or the

1152. “Refugee crisis pushes support for Germany’s Angela Merkel to four-year low”, *The Guardian*, 4 February 2016.

1153. Ibid.

1154. Frederic Niel, “French skinhead confesses in Moroccan’s drowning,” *Reuters*, 11 May 1995; Thomas Kamm, “Chirac wins in France, Creating Uncertainty for Europe,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8 May 1995.

1155. Institut national d’études démographiques, “Annual tables of admission”, <https://statistiques-flux-immigration.site.ined.fr/en/admissions/> (2025).

economic situation in the country of arrival.¹¹⁵⁶ Indeed, in one 2013 study of 15 developed countries, a 1% increase in income per capita at the country of destination was found to increase immigration by 0.76%, while a 1% increase in income per capita at the country of origin reduced immigration from that country by 0.33%.¹¹⁵⁷

Nevertheless, recent history is full of examples of when the overall level of immigration was increased with the use of public policy. For example, the new post-Brexit visa rules implemented under the Conservative Government of Boris Johnson in 2021, which saw a liberalisation of the rules for work and study visas, saw overall arrivals into the UK by long-term immigrants increase from 592,000 in 2019 (2020 saw very low migration numbers globally caused by COVID-19)¹¹⁵⁸ to 1.2 million in 2022.¹¹⁵⁹ This would suggest that, while it is easy to increase the level of migration through policy, it is difficult to lower it. A number of studies have argued that this is due to the increase in size of a ‘migration industry’ – consisting of recruiters, lawyers, smugglers, intermediaries, employers and even friends and family of migrants – once the level of immigration increases, which then facilitates future immigration.¹¹⁶⁰ Even very restrictive immigration policies, such as quotas, fail to counteract this effect, as they inevitably leave room for loopholes or interpretation, or are simply disobeyed: all factors that are facilitated by the growth of a ‘migration industry’.¹¹⁶¹

Consequently, even in the European countries that have

1156. Timothy Hatton, “The rise and fall of asylum: what happened and why?”, *Economic Journal* (2009), 183-213, 208-9.

1157. Francesc Ortega and Giovanni Peri, “The effect of income and immigration policies on international migration”, *Migration Studies* (2013), 47-74, 60, 68.

1158. Office for National Statistics, “Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2020”, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingdecember2020> (2021).

1159. Office for National Statistics, “Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2022”, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingdecember2022> (2023).

1160. Mathias Czaika and Hein de Haas, “The Effectiveness of Immigration Policies”, *Population and Development Review* (2013), 487-508.

1161. Anna Maria Mayda, “International migration: A panel data analysis of economic and non-economic determinants”, *Institute for the Study of Labor* (2005), 3.

unambiguously adopted more restrictive immigration laws in recent years, such as Italy,¹¹⁶² Hungary¹¹⁶³ or Denmark,¹¹⁶⁴ immigration levels continue to rise – even when said laws have been internationally hailed as a success.¹¹⁶⁵ Between 2019 and 2023, annual net migration in each of these countries respectively changed from 47,000 to 150,000,¹¹⁶⁶ 34,000 to 49,000,¹¹⁶⁷ and 9,500 to 31,000,¹¹⁶⁸ and this is unlikely to be due to a drop in emigration numbers.

Policy success is easier found in changing the nature rather than quantity of a country's immigrants. For example, while Italy has seen an increase in the number of legal migrants, its policies, most notably agreements with North African states to crack down on migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea in exchange for financial assistance,¹¹⁶⁹ have successfully decreased the number of illegal arrivals into Italy through the Mediterranean by 64% in only one year – from 2023 to 2024.¹¹⁷⁰ Likewise, Denmark has succeeded at reducing the number of asylum claims from over 21,000 in 2015 to only 2,333 in 2024.¹¹⁷¹ To deter would-be asylum seekers, Denmark introduced a series of measures which include cutting off failed asylum seekers from any state benefits, giving border personnel the right to seize valuables from asylum seekers to cover their expenses and revoking the residency of successful asylum seekers who visit their home countries.¹¹⁷² Likewise, the tightening of visa rules in the UK following Brexit for arrivals from

1162. Ryan King, "Italy's conservative leader Giorgia Meloni has overseen 64% plunge in illegal immigration, foreign minister boasts", *New York Post*, 22 September 2024.

1163. Helena Segarra, "Dismantling the reception of asylum seekers: Hungary's illiberal asylum policies and EU responses", *East European Politics* (2023), 43-63.

1164. David Leonhardt, "In an Age of Right-Wing Populism, Why Are Denmark's Liberals Winning?", *New York Times*, 24 February 2025.

1165. See e.g., "Kemi Badenoch, here's my 10-step plan to save the Tories", *The Times*, 5 May 2025.

1166. Italian National Institute of Statistics, "demography in figures", <https://demo.istat.it/> (2025).

1167. Hungarian Central Statistical Office, "22.1.1.30. Summary data of Hungarian citizens' international migration", https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/en/nep0030.html (2025).

1168. Statistico, "Migration flow in Denmark", <https://www.statistico.com/s/denmark-net-migration-by-year> (2024).

1169. Jennifer Holleis, "Tunisia: Thousands of migrants 'dumped' in the desert", <https://www.dw.com/en/tunisia-thousands-of-migrants-being-dumped-in-the-desert/a-69173646> (2024).

1170. Renata Brito, "Illegal immigration spikes fuel European politics. New data tells a different story", <https://www.csmmonitor.com/World/Europe/2024/0913/Europe-immigration-numbers-drop-far-right> (2024).

1171. Sophia Sleight, "How 8 tough laws implemented by left-wing Danish government slashed asylum bids by 90% – so will Starmer follow suit", *Sun*, 19 April 2025.

1172. *Ibid.*

the EU has led to a sharp decline in the number of EU migrants, from almost 200,000 in the year ending June 2019¹¹⁷³ to only around 126,000 in 2023,¹¹⁷⁴ even as the overall number of immigrants significantly increased. The UK's tightening of visa rules in 2024, spearheaded by the then-Home Secretary James Cleverly, also led to a roughly 50% fall in net migration into the UK – from 860,000 in 2023 to 431,000 in 2024,¹¹⁷⁵ though this is still a far higher number than in almost all years prior to 2019.

The other attempted solution to the immigration problem has been to attempt to reinforce the social fabric despite high immigration levels. This can be done either through increasing the rate of integration or through facilitating cordial relations between people of different cultures, beliefs, values, customs, behaviours and tastes. The two broadly correspond to two different policy approaches to integration, assimilationism and multiculturalism, respectively.

The assimilation approach is best represented by France, where the idea of integration ties into core ideals about the indivisibility of the national republican community. Loyalty to any more specific sub-groupings – be they communal, ethnic, religious or cultural – represent a threat to this shared republican identity. The French centre-right has pursued this approach through numerous policy initiatives, such as the enforcement of strict *laïcité* in public institutions and the promotion of French language and civic education as prerequisites for naturalisation.

The results of this approach, however, have been mixed. A 2024 IFOP survey shows that a majority of French citizens remain sceptical about its efficacy of this approach and 67% of French citizens believe that the country cannot welcome any more immigrants because of unbridgable

1173. Office for National Statistics, "Migration Statistics Quarterly Report: November 2019", <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreport/november2019> (2019).

1174. Office for National Statistics, "Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2023", <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingdecember2023> (2024).

1175. Dominic Casciani and Anna Lamche, "Net migration halved in 2024 to 431,000, ONS says", <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckgx3ekkw1eo> (2025).

differences in values.¹¹⁷⁶ Deep-rooted integration failures are also signalled by persistent social tensions, particularly through recurring urban unrest in deprived *banlieues* which are mainly populated by first-, second- and third-generation immigrants; indeed, widespread unrest in 2005 that triggered a three-week state of emergency was seen as wake-up call to tackle ghettoisation. Repeated flare-ups in the years since, most recently in 2023, suggest that those tensions are still ongoing.¹¹⁷⁷

The best example of multiculturalism, from across the countries we studied in Europe, is the United Kingdom. The UK remains a country relatively divided across ethnic lines; for example, 61% of black people and 60% of Pakistani people in the UK report that their friends are either exclusively or predominantly of the same ethnic background. Yet, despite the UK generally pursuing multiculturalist rather than assimilationist policies, the social fabric in the UK is not very fractured along cultural or ethnic lines, with a recent Policy Exchange report finding that class divides are stronger than racial ones in the UK today. Fifty-four percent of the UK public say that class was more of a determinant of success than race, as compared to 26% who say the opposite; those numbers are generally consistent across every ethnic group polled.¹¹⁷⁸ Moreover, in every ethnic group in the UK, only under 20% say that their ethnic group is treated unfairly in the UK and a majority of respondents in every ethnic group thought that children who are raised in Britain should be taught to be proud of Britain and its history, including +58% net agreement with that statement among black Africans.¹¹⁷⁹

These are not the only indicator of the UK's relative success at integrating recent arrivals. According to the 2022 OECD PISA study, which measures the educational abilities of 15-year-olds, the UK was

1176. Institut français d'opinion publique, "Balise d'opinion #283 Le regard des Français sur l'immigration", <https://www.ifop.com/publication/balise-dopinion-283-le-regard-des-francais-sur-limmigration/> (2024).

1177. Henri Astier, "France riots: Why do the banlieues erupt time and time again?", <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-66071455> (2023).

1178. Rakib Ehsan and Iain Mansfield, "A portrait of modern Britain", https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A_Portrait_of_Modern_Britain.pdf (2024), 21-22.

1179. Ibid.

one of only two countries in Europe – Serbia being the other – where the children of immigrants outperformed those of native parents.¹¹⁸⁰ Inter-ethnic marriage is also becoming much more common, with the 2021 census showing that there were 2.5 million mixed-race households in England and Wales, up 25% from the 2011 census.¹¹⁸¹

Nevertheless, multiculturalism in the UK has had its limitations. First, cross-cultural barriers remain strong in some places. For example, half of black people in the UK say that it is important that a neighbour they leave their house keys with shares their racial background.¹¹⁸² This is illustrative not merely of the lasting existence of strong and separate racial identities, but also of mistrust between different races. Second, even as the UK successfully manages to facilitate cordial relations between different cultures and ethnicities, the same is sometimes untrue of the countries of migrants' origin, which may influence social fabric in the UK. For example, in 2022, Leicester in the UK was subject to riots between its Muslim and Hindu inhabitants provoked by tensions between India and Pakistan – something the UK Government can do little to influence. And, third, even as the UK continues to represent a relatively successful attempt at multiculturalism, it is not enough to assuage voters' worries regarding immigration, or even regarding multiculturalism itself. As explained earlier in this report, the inability to assuage voters' concerns regarding immigration continues to be a major factor behind the UK centre-right's loss of popularity. Indeed, even though the UK's record on multiculturalism is relatively good, it is not uncommon to hear voices of displeasure at the alienation that, in a multicultural society, is inevitable when one enters a space dominated by a culture different to that which one feels at home with.¹¹⁸³ Forty-

1180. Sam Freedman, "The Truth About Integration", <https://samf.substack.com/p/the-truth-about-integration> (2024).

1181. Robert Booth and Michael Goodier, "If you ask me, I am British: joys and trials for Britain's multi-ethnic households", *The Guardian*, 2 December 2022.

1182. Rakib Ehsan and Iain Mansfield, "A portrait of modern Britain", https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A_Portrait_of_Modern_Britain.pdf (2024).

1183. Luca Watson, "Nobody likes the yookay aesthetic", <https://thecritic.co.uk/nobody-likes-the-yookay-aesthetic/> (2025).

four percent of Britons say that they at least sometimes feel like a stranger in their own country, with the proportion higher among lower-income respondents.¹¹⁸⁴

Fertility rates

Fertility rates have gone down consistently for decades in the countries we studied in Europe. In 1960, the birth rate per woman was 2.69 in the United Kingdom, 2.85 in France, 2.37 in Germany, 2.98 in Poland and 3.78 in Ireland. By 1990, this had gone down to 1.83, 1.77, 1.45, 2.06 and 2.11 respectively. Today, it is even lower. In 2023, the UK fertility rate was 1.56; French 1.66; German 1.39; Polish 1.16; and Irish 1.50. This is lower than at any point in human history for which we have data available.¹¹⁸⁵

Low fertility rates are a problem for the centre-right for two reasons. First, for the conservative centre-right, a decline in family life that would come about from low birth rates risks a more individualistic culture; one that is antithetical to the conservative vision for the good life.¹¹⁸⁶ For conservatives, family life is a crucial part of the good life and conservatives generally favour policies that promote families and family life as opposed to lifestyles that do not involve the family. What is more, family life makes one more conservative. Studies across the world have consistently shown that having children makes one more conservative, and that the more children one has, the more conservative one becomes.¹¹⁸⁷ The conservative philosopher Edmund Burke, mentioned earlier in this report, refers to family as one of the “little platoon[s],” the “first link in the series by which we proceed towards a

1184. More in Common, “Social cohesion: A snapshot”, <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/latest-insights/social-cohesion-a-snapshot/> (2025).

1185. World Bank, “Fertility rate, total (births per woman)”, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?view=map&year=2023> (2024).

1186. Bartek Staniszewski and Ryan Shorthouse, “The case for more kids”, <https://thecritic.co.uk/the-case-for-more-kids/> (2025).

1187. E.g., Nicholas Kerry, “Experimental and cross-cultural evidence that parenthood and parental care motives increase social conservatism”, <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rspb.2022.0978> (2022).

love to our country, and to mankind”.¹¹⁸⁸

Second, and more universally, low fertility rates present an economic problem. When the fertility rate is below the replacement rate, generally held to be around 2.1 children per woman, the ratio of workers to dependents – those who make a negative net contribution to state finances, generally young people still in education and pensioners – begins to worsen – that is, there are fewer workers for every dependent and, with each subsequent generation, there are fewer workers overall, assuming zero net migration. This means that dependents have to provide more in taxes in order to maintain the same level of support for dependents, but this requires either unpopular and potentially economically damaging tax hikes; an increase in a country’s deficit; or very high economic growth, which too is made more difficult by the fall in the number of workers. This is a source of dissatisfaction for both workers and dependents; the former because they face the prospect of higher taxes and the latter because they face the prospect of lower levels of support from the state. In that, the problem of low fertility rates is intimately linked to the problem of poor economic record in recent decades and is indeed yet another source of it.¹¹⁸⁹

The economic problem relies on the assumption of zero net migration, but incentivising higher immigration levels in order to resolve the economic problem – migrants tend to be working-age, and therefore positive net migration is indeed able to reduce the economic problem, particularly if the immigrants are high-skilled and so less likely to claim high levels of social security but more likely to pay more in taxes. But the evidence suggests the impact is only marginal. Regardless, it is not a viable solution for the centre-right for the reasons explained above. Moreover, even were those reasons ignored, high immigration levels cannot be relied on indefinitely. According to UN projections from

1188. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the revolution in France* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2003), 40.

1189. Neil O’Brien and Phoebe Arslanagic-Little, “The UK must embrace pro-natalist policy”, <https://www.newstatesman.com/comment/2024/11/the-uk-must-embrace-pro-natalist-policy> (2024).

2024 – which consistently overestimated birth rates in the past – global populations will peak in 2084 as a result of declining fertility rates across the globe. If non-European countries are also facing declining populations, they cannot be relied on to keep supplying migrants for European countries, as eventually their populations will run dry.¹¹⁹⁰

Only some European countries have explicitly tried to address the fertility challenge. From among the European countries we studied, the chief of them is France. As of 2021, French spending on family policy, which includes family allowances and tax credits for parents amounted to 3.6% of GDP, the highest level of any OECD member state.¹¹⁹¹ Those are estimated by academic studies to have boosted the French fertility rate by between 0.1 and 0.2.¹¹⁹² Since those policies were introduced in the fifties, the French population was boosted by between five and ten million people as an effect of said policies; as much as 15% of France's total population today is the direct result of French pro-family policies.¹¹⁹³

With that said, France is spending almost 3.5% of its GDP annually on family benefits.¹¹⁹⁴ What is more, the policies have proved insufficient to stop the French fertility rate from declining below the replacement level. In recent decades, the French birth rate was 2.55 children per woman in 1970; this was only 1.66 in 2023 – though this is still one of the highest rates in Europe.

In general, it is clear that pro-family policies do boost the fertility rate, even if they remain costly. The other European country that spends significant sums on family benefits besides France is Sweden. Family benefits include the right for up to 240 days of paid parental leave for

1190. Our World in Data, "Peak global population and other key findings from the 2024 UN World Population Prospects", <https://ourworldindata.org/un-population-2024-revision> (2024).

1191. Corinne Chérubini et al., "Review of social and tax expenditure in favor of family policy", <https://igas.gouv.fr/Review-of-social-and-tax-expenditure-in-favor-of-family-policy> (2021).

1192. Lyman Stone, "Does pronatal policy work? It did in France", <https://ifstudies.org/blog/does-pronatal-policy-work-it-did-in-france> (2025).

1193. *Ibid.*

1194. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "OECD Family Database:

PF1.1 Public spending on family benefits", https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/data/datasets/family-database/pf1_1_public_spending_on_family_benefits.pdf (2023).

each parent worth 80% of their previous income, 45 days of which can be transferred to grandparents, as well as the right to affordable nursery school places for each child over a year old.¹¹⁹⁵ The Swedish birth rate was already only 1.68 children per woman in 1980; this had only decreased to 1.45 as of 2023 and was above the replacement rate as recently as 1991.¹¹⁹⁶ Improvements, though, can also be achieved without such high levels of expenditure.

Czechia, which is spending over a percentage point less as a proportion of GDP on family benefits than France – and less than the OECD average – has seen its fertility rate improve consistently since the turn of the century, from 1.13 in 1999 to 1.83 in 2021.¹¹⁹⁷ This has been driven by both economic and social factors. For example, on the social side, 48% of Czechs believe that having children is a social duty, as compared to only 22% of people from neighbouring Poland.¹¹⁹⁸ On the economic side, in 1995, Czechia expanded its statutory parental leave up until a child's fourth birthday, with job protections until the third birthday and 27 weeks of paid maternal leave at 69% of salary.¹¹⁹⁹

Nonetheless, it is clear that policies to increase the fertility rate are pushing against very powerful cultural factors, most notably the growing preference among women to have fewer children.¹²⁰⁰ Policy must seek to address these cultural factors to have any chance of success.

Polarisation between men and women

We are currently experiencing, both across Europe and also much of the developed world, the highest-in-decades levels of political

1195. Swedish Institute, "Sweden has made it easier to combine a career with a rich life outside of work. Here's how", <https://sweden.se/work-business/working-in-sweden/work-life-balance> (2025).

1196. World Bank, "Fertility rate, total (births per woman) – Sweden", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?end=2023&locations=SE&start=1960&view=chart> (2024).

1197. Agaton Koziński, "The Czech's effective response to Europe's demographic crisis", <https://3seaseurope.com/czech-demography-crisis/> (2022).

1198. Ibid.

1199. Tomáš Sobotka, "Low fertility in Austria and the Czech Republic: Gradual policy adjustments", <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/110987/1/818640359.pdf> (2015).

1200. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Society at a Glance 2024: OECD Social Indicators", https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/society-at-a-glance-2024_918d8db3-en/full-report/fertility-trends-across-the-oecd-underlying-drivers-and-the-role-for-policy_770679b8.html (2024).

polarisation between men and women. We use the qualifier ‘highest-in-decades’ because we have no survey data on political polarisation between men and women stretching back hundreds of years, but it is possible that the levels of polarisation between men and women that we see today are the highest in centuries. In the mid-eighties men and women in many Western countries expressed broadly similar attitudes on a liberal-conservative cultural spectrum. For example, a study of data from Eurobarometer surveys of ideological self-placement by academics Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris found that, although women tended to be more philosophically conservative than men in the seventies, their attitudes had converged by the mid-eighties.¹²⁰¹

But now a gulf has since opened up between men and women again, with both German and UK women under the age of 30 over 20 percentage points more likely to support left-wing parties as compared to men.¹²⁰² At the 2024 UK general election, for example, 23% of 18-24-year old women voted for the left-wing Green Party, almost double the 12% of 18-24-year old men who did so.¹²⁰³ This is part of a global trend; in the US, this number is almost 40 and, in South Korea, around 50.¹²⁰⁴ What is more, this gulf is worsening, with the gulf generally being much more pronounced among younger people.¹²⁰⁵

Alice Evans, a Senior Lecturer at KCL and the author of *The Great Gender Divergence* suggests that the two main causes of this divergence are economic stagnation and social media. As the economy slows down, it facilitates a ‘zero-sum mentality’ among both genders who now see policies that seek to promote gender equality as an economic fighting ground; if the other gender is doing better as a result of some policy, the thinking goes, my gender must be doing worse – and vice versa –

1201. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “The developmental theory of the gender gap: Women’s and men’s voting behavior in global perspective”, *International Political Science Review* (2000), 441-63.

1202. John Burn-Murdoch, “A new global gender divide is emerging”, *Financial Times*, 26 January 2024.

1203. Adam McDonnell, “How Britain voted in the 2024 general election”, <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/49978-how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-general-election> (2024).

1204. John Burn-Murdoch, “A new global gender divide is emerging”, *Financial Times*, 26 January 2024.

1205. Rosa Silverman, “The Gen Z gender gap: why young men are turning their backs on feminism”, *The Telegraph*, 1 February 2024.

and therefore I will support policies that will advantage my gender and disadvantage the other gender and oppose policies that advantage the other gender. This could be addressed by improving economic growth.¹²⁰⁶

The other cause is related to social media, Evans suggests.¹²⁰⁷ Especially among younger people, social media is increasingly replacing traditional mediums such as television as their main source of news. For example, a 2024 Eurobarometer survey for the European Parliament of 16-30-year-old EU citizens found that social media was the main source of news for 42% of respondents, ahead of television (39%) or news websites (26%). Among 16-18 year-olds, the proportion of citing social media as their main source of news increases to 45%.¹²⁰⁸

Social media algorithms encourage so-called ‘echo chambers’ – spaces where one is only exposed to views that one already agrees with – hence further radicalising social media users in whatever political direction they were already heading, though this does raise the question of why men and women are heading in rightward and leftward political directions in the first place. Evans puts particular blame on ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ – social media personalities who seek to capitalise on broadening gender divides.

Some articles have also suggested unequal educational attainment as a cause – in recent decades, women across Europe have overtaken men in terms of higher education participation levels.¹²⁰⁹ This could explain women’s cultural leftward shift on the supposition that higher education participation makes one more culturally left-wing through exposure to culturally liberal ideas that they otherwise might not have.¹²¹⁰ For

1206. Alice Evans, “What Prevents & What Drives Gendered Ideological Polarisation?”, <https://www.ggd.world/p/what-prevents-and-what-drives-gendered> (2024).

1207. Ibid.

1208. European Parliament, “Eurobarometer: Youth Survey 2024”, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3392> (2025), 26, 29.

1209. Servet Yanatma, “Which countries are home to the most educated people in Europe?”, <https://www.euronews.com/next/2024/08/17/which-countries-are-home-to-the-most-educated-people-in-europe> (2024).

1210. The Economist, “Why young men and women are drifting apart”, <https://www.economist.com/international/2024/03/13/why-the-growing-gulf-between-young-men-and-women> (2024); Tim Wigmore, “The sexes are becoming more divided than ever – and the global birth rate is suffering”, *The Telegraph*, 26 May 2025.

example, in 2022, 48% of European women had tertiary education as compared to only 37% of European men. On the other hand, in 1970 in the UK, there were still over twice as many men obtaining university degrees as compared to women.¹²¹¹

This is a problem for the centre-right because, first, historically, the centre-right relied on women. Multiple historical studies have found European women to be much more socially conservative than men,¹²¹² and women were generally more likely than men to vote for centre-right parties and so were a large source of electoral support for the centre-right.

In the UK, in the general elections between 1945 and 1970, women were on average 11 percentage points more likely to support the centre-right Conservatives over centre-left Labour as compared to men.¹²¹³ That fell slightly between 1970 and 2015, to an average of only three percentage points, and then changed drastically between 2015 and 2017 to -6,¹²¹⁴ where it remained in 2019.¹²¹⁵ Curiously, however, the trend reversed again in 2024, with women two percentage points more likely to support the Conservatives over Labour than men, as men were five percentage points more likely to support the populist Reform, with the emergence of men's recent shift rightwards.¹²¹⁶

Likewise, in Germany, between 1953 and 1969, women were on average almost ten percentage points more likely to support the CDU/CSU than men.¹²¹⁷ This fell to -3 in the 2025 election.¹²¹⁸ With European women

1211. Paul Bolton, "Education: Historical statistics", <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04252/SN04252.pdf> (2012), 20.

1212. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "The developmental theory of the gender gap: Women's and men's voting behavior in global perspective", *International Political Science Review* (2000), 441-63.

1213. Pippa Norris, "Gender: A gender-generation gap?", in Geoffrey Evans and Pippa Norris (eds.), *Critical elections: British parties and voters in long-term perspective* (London: Sage, 1999), 148-63, 152.

1214. Chris Curtis, "How Britain voted at the 2017 general election", <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/18384-how-britain-voted-2017-general-election> (2017).

1215. Adam McDonnell and Chris Curtis "How Britain voted in the 2019 general election", <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/26925-how-britain-voted-2019-general-election> (2019).

1216. Adam McDonnell, How Britain voted in the 2024 general election", <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/49978-how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-general-election> (2024).

1217. Konrad Adenauer Foundation, "Bundestags- und Europawahlen in Deutschland" https://downloads.kas.de/wahlen/WahlDaten/Wahlen_in_Deutschland.pdf (2025).

1218. Reuters, "Germany's election in graphics", <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germanys-election-graphics-2025-02-23/> (2025).

diverging from men in a politically leftward direction, the centre-right can no longer rely on them.

Second, polarisation between men and women is also a problem for the centre-right because it is linked to the problem of family life. If women and men find it harder to form agreeable relationships, they are unable to form families, which damages conservative parties. This effect is currently most pronounced outside of Europe. In the USA, 71% of college-age Democrats – supporters of one of the two largest US political parties – report that they would not date somebody with opposing political views,¹²¹⁹ yet the views of men and women are more apart than ever. South Korea, which has the widest gulf between the political attitudes of men and women, also happens to have one of the lowest fertility rates in the world at 0.75.¹²²⁰ Europe is facing the same problem at a slightly smaller scale; in the UK, for example, around 40% of respondents to a 2021 YouGov survey said they would not date somebody who voted for the opposite party.¹²²¹

There have not been many overt attempts to address polarisation between men and women among European governments. Nevertheless, two broad strategies can be distinguished: moving to the cultural left together with women; or attempting to re-integrate men and women into a shared social fabric, mirroring the assimilationist approach to integration policy.

On moving to the cultural left together with women, multiple European centre-right parties have moved to the cultural left in recent decades. For example, centre-right-led governments in Ireland,¹²²²

1219. Washington Post Editorial Board, "If attitudes don't shift, a political dating mismatch will threaten marriage", *Washington Post*, 22 November 2023.

1220. Justin McCurry, "South Korea birthrate rises for first time in nine years amid surge in marriages", *The Guardian*, 26 February 2025.

1221. Connor Ibbetson, "How willing are Brits to date people with opposing politics?",

<https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/38433-brits-date-opposing-politics> (2021).

1222. Éanna Ó Caollaí and Mark Hilliard, "Ireland becomes first country to approve same-sex marriage by popular vote", *Irish Times*, 24 May 2015.

Germany¹²²³ and the UK¹²²⁴ presided over the legalisation of same-sex marriage. Beyond gay marriage, the Irish centre-right also presided over the decriminalisation of abortion.¹²²⁵ This has rarely been done overtly in order to win over women voters, but it is likely one of the causes behind said moves.

Ireland offers a key example of this behaviour, with both centre-right parties tacking culturally leftwards on social issues in recent decades. For example, despite much internal dissent, the senior leadership of both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael supported the repeal of Ireland's controversial abortion ban in the 2018 referendum on this subject. However, it is worth noting that this approach has had some drawbacks. For example, both centre-right parties were humiliated in March 2024 by their support of the 'Yes' vote in two constitutional referenda proposing to extend the definition of family to include relationships outside marriage and to replace gendered language on women. Two 'No' victories – of 68% and 74% respectively – suggest that the parties had shifted too far in one direction, losing touch with their base, just as seen with analogous attempts by the centre-right to win over populist voters through moves in the other direction. Furthermore, this approach does nothing to address the problem of poor family formation resultant from the increasing political gulf between men and women.

On attempting to re-integrate men and women into a shared social fabric, the hope behind this approach is that it would facilitate a shift of women voters away from the cultural left and men to the cultural right. Few such policies have been attempted, perhaps due to the difficulty in designing them and due to the recency of men's shift towards the political right. The only policies that have directly tackled the causes of the widening gap between men and women are policies that have

1223. BBC, "Germany gay marriage approved by MPs in snap vote", <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40441712> (2017).

1224. BBC, "Same-sex marriage now legal as first couples wed", <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-26793127> (2014).

1225. BBC, "Irish abortion referendum: Ireland overturns abortion ban", <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44256152> (2018).

attempted to boost economic growth, discussed above, which should erode the zero-sum mentality that is driving division between men and women; and social media regulation attempting to reduce the prevalence of echo chambers and cultural entrepreneurs. For example, in 2023 in the UK, amendments to the Online Safety Bill were put forward that were intended to target social algorithms that facilitate echo chambers, with the infamous cultural entrepreneur Andrew Tate explicitly targeted.¹²²⁶ New measures introduced by the UK media regulator Ofcom in 2025 are also intended to tackle misogynistic speech¹²²⁷ – though this would only serve to alleviate men’s rightward cultural radicalisation without addressing the issue of women’s divergence towards the cultural left.

Worth mentioning here is that, despite the talk of men shifting culturally rightward, it would be more accurate to say, as analysis of global polling data by the *Financial Times* noted, that younger women have moved further to the cultural left while men have either stayed put or only moved to the right much more recently.¹²²⁸ Moreover, most prominent examples of cultural entrepreneurs who are seen as facilitating this perceived shift have little in common with most of the values this report associates with right-of-centre political philosophy – in particular conservatism – and is more accurately described as merely misogynistic and anti-egalitarian.

This Chapter unearthed leading contemporary challenges currently faced by the European centre-right and some attempts at tackling them. But these challenges need addressing not just because they are in the interest of the centre-right, but because they are in the national interest too. They are also common challenges across European countries that need addressing by any governments – climate change, an increasingly antagonistic Russia, a more unreliable US, ageing populations and struggling public services.

1226. Chris Vallance, “Online Safety Bill: Algorithms that lead boys to Andrew Tate content targeted”, BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-66164222> (2023).

1227. Matthew Field, “Britain launches crackdown on ‘hyper-masculine’ social media”, *The Telegraph*, 25 February 2025.

1228. John Burn-Murdoch, “A new global gender divide is emerging”, *Financial Times*, 26 January 2024.

What the European centre-right needs to do is offer distinctive and successful policies to address these challenges, based on clear priorities that differentiate from the statist centre-left and the populist right. This is what the final Chapter aims to do.

Chapter Nine: New priorities

The last Chapter outlined the leading contemporary challenges the centre-right faces across Europe. This Chapter will propose new priorities and policies for the centre-right – to tackle these challenges, as well as the general major challenges nations face – so it can be a popular and successful movement again, distinct from the statist centre-left and the populist right. These priorities will flow from the leading historical European centre-right principles we outlined in Chapter Two.

The historical and leading centre-right principles we identified were conservatism, non-cosmopolitanism and economic liberalism. Throughout modern history, different European countries – specifically the UK, Germany, France, Ireland and Poland – have applied particularised versions of these principles, which we described as their core tenets. Although we described periods of time where these leading European centre-right principles were in direct conflict, the centre-right in different countries generally find a balance between the three.

There are leading contemporary challenges to the European centre-right: the ascendancy of right-wing populism; lack of a unclear differentiation from a left-wing alternative; poor record on economic policy in recent times; and demographic change. But there are also major challenges across European countries that any government, centre-right or otherwise, would have to deal with. We might distinguish between these as centre-right and national challenges. The centre-right

must have priorities and policies that deal with both.

The most serious national challenges that European countries face, according to the European public, are Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the cost of living and climate change. Across the EU, the European Commission regularly conducts the Eurobarometer survey which asks Europeans across EU countries what they think the two most important challenges facing the EU are. As of spring 2025, the Russian invasion was the most prevalent choice among respondents, with 27% of them deeming it a top-two challenge, followed by the related issues of 'the international situation' (24%) and 'security and defence' (20%).¹²²⁹ Sixteen percent of respondents said that the cost of living is the EU's top-two most serious challenge, and 10% said that climate change is a top-two challenge. This means they are perceived as far more serious than almost any other challenge that EU residents were surveyed on, including crime (6%) and health (5%).

The UK public thinks similarly, but not identically. In the UK, too, More in Common has polled Britons in 2025 on the most important challenges facing the country, with respondents being able to choose three options, and there the cost of living emerged as the most serious issue, with 61% of respondents deeming it a top-three issue.¹²³⁰ A YouGov polling tracker of the residents of Great Britain has also found that 20% of Britons deem 'defence and security' to be a top-three issue as of June 2025 and, likewise, 20% deem 'the environment' to be one,¹²³¹ secondary only to 'the economy,' 'immigration & asylum' and 'health,' the last of which, uniquely for the UK, has consistently featured as a major political issue throughout the last few decades.

The centre-right, generally, is struggling to win sufficient electoral support across Europe. So the task for the European centre-right

1229. European Union, "Standard Eurobarometer 103 – Spring 2025", <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3372> (2025).

1230. More in Common, "Tracking public opinion", <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/voting-intention-trackers/> (2025).

1231. YouGov, "The most important issues facing the country", <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/the-most-important-issues-facing-the-country> (2025).

now is to evolve and apply its core principles – conservatism, non-cosmopolitanism and economic liberalism – to tackle these contemporary centre-right and national challenges with distinctive priorities and effective policies.

A crucial mistake made by the centre-right in multiple European countries in recent years has been the failure to articulate and maintaining a clear and distinctive political identity. Rather than shunning away from a set of immutable core principles, our recommended priorities and policies embrace them; first, because those principles – conservatism, non-cosmopolitanism and economic liberalism – are right; and second, because the centre-right needs to draw lines which clearly distinguish it from its ideological rivals – in particular, the statist centre-left and the populist right. The current UK Conservative Party leader, Kemi Badenoch, has therefore been right to adopt a principles-first approach.¹²³²

The challenges European countries face are serious and significant. The centre-right cannot afford to be timid in its priorities and policies. But, equally, these priorities and policies need to be realistic; there is no point making a recommendation if the centre-right would never be able to bring it about, either because it would not have the political capital to do it should it come to power, or because embracing a priority or policy would prevent it from being elected in the first place. While public popularity is not the determinant of whether a priority or policy is ultimately desirable or not, they need to at least have the potential to be popular enough for it to be possible to pursue it to recommend it.

This Chapter now offers ten priorities – with some accompanying policy suggestions – that would help both the European centre-right and each European country as a whole. Our recommended priorities and policies are deliberately broad to be applicable to different European countries. And our recommended policies are not exhaustive; instead, we highlight policy suggestions for the centre-right that could be most

1232. Sam Francis and Joshua Nevett, "They're tough-talking and on the Tory right – but how do Badenoch and Jenrick differ?", www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c99v52x1dleo (2024).

distinctive, effective and salient.

While the purpose of this report is to help the centre-right, we have no interest in facilitating the interests of the centre-right at the expense of the public good. While it is generally true that public interests and the interests of the centre-right coincide, there may be circumstances where this is not true. On the contrary, all our recommended priorities and policies seek to facilitate the interests of the centre-right while also serving the public good.

Our proposed 10 priorities for the European centre-right are: country; capitalism; copiousness; competence; contribution; community; civility; care; children; and conservation.

Priority one: Country.

Underlying non-cosmopolitanism is the concept of country, or nation. It has been the source of belonging, unity and unparalleled determination for Europeans since at least the French Revolution. The English twentieth-century singer Vera Lynn, for example, famously defines England as “while there’s a country lane, wherever there’s a cottage small, beside a field of grain,” and, despite the vagueness of the definition, goes on to sing that “England shall be free, if England means as much to you, as England means to me.” An analogous sentiment is regularly present in the music, poetry, film and art of all European countries.¹²³³

The centre-left tends to be uncomfortable with country as a priority, worried that it is incompatible with global justice or that it can lead to aggressive nationalism, the height of which was experienced in the World Wars of the twentieth century. Instead, and perhaps paradoxically, the centre-left has generally favoured uniting under the banners of class, race, gender or sexuality instead.¹²³⁴ And, indeed, their worries are sometimes vindicated by the concept of country often articulated by

1233. Cf. Nenad Miscevic, “Nationalism” in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2024).

1234. Bartek Staniszewski, “Britain’s adoration of the NHS is nothing to celebrate”, *The Spectator*, 8 March 2024.

the populist right. The concept of country favoured by the populist right often resembles ethno-nationalism, whereby one's genetic makeup is the sole determinant of one's national, or country, belonging. This concept, besides being philosophically implausible, is also unhelpful to solving the demographic challenge mentioned in earlier Chapters, as it makes the integration of immigrants into the country impossible; nobody can change their genetic makeup. What is more, the populist right often sees countries primarily as vehicles for isolation. While the centre-left favours dissolving the concept of country,¹²³⁵ so as to open up to serving a global community instead, the populist right favours isolating the country from the global community altogether.

The centre-right, on the other hand, should be open to cooperating with the global community – with other countries – but only in order to serve the country's own interests. Indeed, the interests of the country are rarely best-served by isolationism; a country can become much happier, more secure and more prosperous by cooperating with other countries. This sentiment was invoked in January 2025 by the Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, in a speech to the European Parliament where he quoted the late Pope Saint John Paul II, “Be not afraid ... The future is in our hands. Not Chinese, not Russian, not American – in our hands ... I am convinced that we will be working together for the good of a greater Europe. Europe is, was, and will always be great”.¹²³⁶

To this end, the centre-right should foster a greater shared national identity for people to unite around in each respective country, but one that is open for new entrants. This is a civic conception of nationalism.¹²³⁷ This identity must make those exposed to it feel as though they are a part of a common, co-operative scheme with every other person who subscribes to that same vision, as elaborated on in Box 2.4 of this report;

1235. For example, Charles Foran, “The Canada experiment: is this the world's first ‘postnational’ country?”, *The Guardian*, 4 January 2017.

1236. Donald Tusk, *Europe is not yet lost as long as we are alive* – European Parliament, 22 January 2025, <https://polish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/the-speech-of-polish-prime-minister-at-the-european-parliament-europe-is-not-yet-lost-as-long-as-we-are-alive/>.

1237. Bartek Staniszewski, “Britain's adoration of the NHS is nothing to celebrate”, *The Spectator*, 8 March 2024.

and it must detract from a vision of ethnic nationalism bound up in immutable characteristics, such as genetic heritage.

Policy suggestions

- Ensuring all young adults, not just migrants acquiring citizenship, participate in citizenship ceremonies to celebrate their national identity.
- A voluntary and competitive national service scheme open to all school leavers, similar to the current policy in Norway, where only 17% of school leavers do national service, but where it is a sought-after mark of prestige and a helpful boost to one's future career prospects.¹²³⁸
- European countries should co-operate on defence, including by re-affirming commitments to mutual defence pacts, to better defend each European country. No individual European country is strong enough to alone resist a serious extra-European threat.¹²³⁹
- European countries should co-operate to better manage illegal immigration, including through the processing of asylum seekers in – and deportation of failed asylum seekers to – third countries.

Priority two: Capitalism.

Much as the concept of country underlies non-cosmopolitanism, economic liberalism underlies capitalism. Capitalists believe that the accumulation of capital is good, in disagreement with Karl Marx's supposition that the accumulation of capital leads to the suppression of wages; conversely, people who take risks and invest into capital driven by the motive for profit¹²⁴⁰ – capitalists, or entrepreneurs – also make everybody richer and should be celebrated.

Capitalism is often criticised by the centre-left, who associate it with

1238. Elisabeth Braw, "In Norway, young people compete to serve in the military", <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2024/01/norway-young-people-compete-serve-military/393599/> (2025).

1239. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2025* (London: Routledge, 2025).

1240. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 455-456.

greed and inequality, but it is also out of favour with the populist right, as explored earlier in the report. For the populist right, capitalists are often enemies of ‘the people,’ particularly if they also work with capital and capitalists from abroad, supposedly to the detriment of local people. This kind of thinking has now permeated into the thinking of European governments and made all of Europe poorer as a result – indeed, it is the key to Europe’s growth challenge.

In an effort to accommodate concerns around capitalism, the centre-right has consistently overregulated entrepreneurialism and enterprise. European regulatory culture can be contrasted to that of the US, where capitalism is much more celebrated, as explored in the previous Chapter. To address this, the centre-right must seek to reduce and simplify the regulatory burden faced by European enterprises – and entrepreneurs in particular – to make it easier for them to drive profits and innovation.

Policy suggestions

- The weight of taxation more generally should be shifted away from work and entrepreneurship and towards those who derive income from rent-seeking on their assets.
- Tax benefits for the risk-taking of entrepreneurs should be applied much earlier in the entrepreneurial journey.
- Regulators should be mandated to produce estimates of the costs of the regulation that is introduced on enterprise.

Priority three: Copiousness.

Copiousness is the abundance of all things good. By wanting copiousness, the centre-right should strive and fight to have more and better growth, wages, infrastructure, energy, food, leisure and all other good things in recognition that we can have more of every good thing; as opposed to always seeking to minimise potential harm and risk in fear that one good thing might compromise another. In short, the centre-right should stand for positive-sum thinking (even if some

people get more, this is good if everyone benefits), whereas the centre-left (in the case of capitalism) and the populist right (in the case of highly skilled migration) stand for zero-sum thinking (if some people get more, this is bad even if there is a net benefit).

Copiousness is closely related to economic liberalism. Economically liberal policies are designed to maximise copiousness, as explained in the first Chapter of this report; free economic agents choose to reward the suppliers of the goods and services that the agents find good or desirable.

Economic liberalism is often criticised by left-wing thinkers for pushing for more production and consumption of things both good and bad. This critique has been very influential among the European centre-left, which often seeks to regulate the production and provision of new things in fear of their negative externalities, to the degree that it has become very difficult in Europe to do anything at all, as it is nigh impossible to do something without it introducing at least some risk of some harm to some people.

Centre-right policymaking, rather than seeking to create policy which harms nothing, should seek to create policy that helps as many people as possible; it should seek to make it easy to have more of everything good, basically. In that, it would also distinguish itself from the populist right, which is generally not very interested in liberalising economic policy.

Policy suggestions

- Expand all forms of credible homegrown energy infrastructure, including nuclear, renewables and gas.
- Introduce ambitious housebuilding targets and deliver them through zonal planning policies where housing development in designated areas cannot be blocked by local opposition.

Priority four: Competence.

The centre-right has traditionally been known for its competence. Even when voters do not support centre-right philosophy, they have often recognised that centre-right governments make difficult decisions to

ensure the economy grows and public services are well-managed. This reputation has, however, eroded in recent years, driven largely by the lack of a clear and consistent policy direction and internal disunity that is uncondusive to effective government.

Competence has a lot to do with centrism. Being able to keep the machinery of government well-oiled requires cooperation from and efficiency of institutions, but institutions will not be cooperative or efficient if they are captured or destroyed. In that, there is also an element of competence to conservatism – if something works and has worked for a long time, conservatives will not seek to change it in a radical pursuit of abstract ideological goals.

This is something that is particularly anathema to populists, who are characterised by their keenness to tear down or capture institutions. While it is theoretically possible for populists to be competent – by tearing down institutions in order to replace them with more efficient ones – historical examples of this are few, if any, perhaps demonstrating the difficulty of rebuilding efficient institutions from scratch.

The centre-left, too, sometimes falls into the trap of incompetent governance in the pursuit of ideological goals. For example, an adequate system for employee pay in the English city of Birmingham has in 2012 been upended by a court ruling on the UK Equality Act, which sought to achieve equality in pay between men and women, but has been interpreted in a way which made it very difficult for the Birmingham local government to pay men and women differently even for different jobs. This ultimately resulted in the local authority declaring bankruptcy in 2023 and a disastrous strike by the predominantly male rubbish collectors in 2025.¹²⁴¹

1241. Fred De Fossard, "Birmingham is the tip of an iceberg of trash", <https://www.prosperity.com/media-publications/equality-law-is-bankrupting-britain/> (2025).

Policy suggestions

- In opposition, always conduct formal and expert-led policy commissions – a process which should be mandated through the constitutions of centre-right parties – to be prepared for government on day one.
- Always have fiscal rules that seek to achieve a structural budget surplus in day-to-day spending.
- Establish expert independent bodies that always vet fiscal policy and set monetary policy.

Priority five: Contribution.

Contribution refers to people taking responsibility for improving their own lives, or the lives of those around them such as their family and community, rather than relying on others to improve circumstances, especially the state. It stems from a widespread belief that what is fair is that the rewards people receive in life should be linked to their effort.¹²⁴²

Contribution is strongly linked to economic liberalism, insofar as they rest in a shared sentiment – if everybody is allowed to take responsibility for their life, everybody is better off. People who contribute extra effort to their lot should be appropriately rewarded, producing an incentive to work more. This is in contrast to policies, typically promoted by the centre-left, that seek to equalise outcomes between people with different contribution levels. There is also an element of conservatism to this way of thinking about contribution. Conservatives generally adopt the Christian – and, indeed, Abrahamic – line of thinking on free will and moral accountability, that is, that it exists. And if one is morally accountable for their hard work or the lack thereof, they should be appropriately rewarded.¹²⁴³

1242. Neil O'Brien, "Just Deserts? Attitudes to Fairness, Poverty and Welfare Reform", <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/just-deserts-apr-11.pdf> (2011).

1243. Daniel Pitt, "There's a lot more to success and happiness than luck", <https://conservativehome.com/2017/11/05/daniel-pitt-theres-a-lot-more-to-success-and-happiness-than-luck/> (2017).

This way of thinking distinguishes the centre-right from both the centre-left and the populist right. On the left, one's ability to work hard or not is sometimes seen as merely an inevitable consequence of socio-economic factors beyond your control and something that one is not morally accountable for; if you work hard, you are no more praise- or blameworthy than somebody who does not.¹²⁴⁴ But sometimes for the populist right, too, the way contribution is rewarded can be perverted, as some groups are never rewarded for their contribution while some are never punished for the lack thereof – the populist right is sometimes associated with resentment towards minority groups that, through hard work, managed to achieve superior living standards than the local majority. Indeed, the other side of the contribution coin is that the people who do not contribute should not be rewarded.

Policy suggestions

- Introduce supplements to working-age benefits for people with longer working histories such that those people can get better support from the welfare system if they end up needing it.
- Increase the age at which people draw down state and private pensions to incentivise older worker to work and contribute for longer.
- Introduce new time-limited taxes and volunteering requirements on new skilled migrants.

Priority six: Community.

Community is often at the centre of centre-right thinking. Much like country, community is strongly linked to non-cosmopolitanism. As mentioned earlier in this report, the philosopher John Rawls describes community as a group of people engaging in a system of cooperation for mutual benefit where each member has special obligations to each other member of said group just by virtue of being a member

1244. To say that somebody is morally accountable for something is often defined as that it is appropriate to either praise or blame them for that something. See Matthew Talbert, "Moral Responsibility" in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2024).

of the group. Often, communities are united by shared traditions, practices or challenges.

Given its relationship to non-cosmopolitanism, it should be unsurprising that community is of particular importance to the centre-right. While the centre-left and the populist right too are interested in community, their approach to what communities they view as important differs. Traditionally, the single community of pre-eminent importance to left-wing politics has been the working class, though it is debatable to what degree the working class constitutes a single community. For the populist right, the most important communities are those united by geographical proximity or ethnic makeup; paradoxically, the centre-left is also often interested in communities on the basis of their ethnicity – communities composed of ethnic minorities, while the populist right has a special interest in a community composed of the ethnic majority.

The centre-right, in contrast, is more interested in communities united by often intangible characteristics, such as shared values, customs, traditions, beliefs and so on, regardless of their ethnic background or class, gender or sexual allegiance. Indeed, country, mentioned above, can be one such community, but other communities prioritised by the centre-right are usually more local than that. The centre-right are also much more interested in fostering communities that people can create and join, rather than solidifying communities that people have no choice in joining because of certain characteristics they have.

Policy suggestions

- Schoolchildren, sometime between the ages of 13 and 15, could be mandated to do local volunteering for at least a week during the school year.
- Employees could be given a new right to take at least two extra days a year off in order to do volunteering.
- Permanent settlement or the ability to receive state benefits could be conditional on the ability to demonstrate proficiency in the local language.

Priority seven: Civility.

Civility is the commitment to upholding unwritten social rules, or an unwritten social contract, often bound by social or cultural norms. A civil society is one where people are not displeased by spending time in the public space, but rather their expectations towards spending time in that space are met. What is more, a civil society is one where everybody is better off. While it may be very convenient for one person to throw their litter on the street, and only slightly inconvenient for everybody else, if everybody does it, everybody is significantly worse off; more so than they would be if they had to go through the effort of throwing their litter in the bin.

Civility is closely related to conservatism. While non-conservatives are either unattached to existing social or cultural norms, especially unwritten ones, or even actively seek to abrogate them, conservatives see them as the expression of ancient, accumulated experience and wisdom. It is also related to non-cosmopolitanism, insofar as the behaviour of non-local people may be seen as non-civil by locals; in a civil society, those non-locals have to adjust their behaviour, even if it comes at the expense of the norms of their place of origin.¹²⁴⁵

For those reasons, the centre-left rarely sees civility as important. Progress, for the centre-left, is often in contradiction with established social and cultural norms, particularly if said norms serve to entrench or facilitate the interests of privileged groups or inequality or other values important to the political left. The centre-left is also often reluctant to ask non-local cultures to sacrifice cultural baggage, even if it is to maintain civility, particularly if representatives of said non-local cultures are already worse off compared to the average resident, as they worry this worsens their already relatively poor situation.

The populist right, on the other hand, often pays lip service to civility – civility is closely linked also to law and order, which is a consistent policy focus for the populist right – but in fact often betrays a lack of civility

1245. A good example is talking on the train. Perfectly acceptable in Italy, but very frowned upon in Japan.

in the democratic space, where it is prone to offence and scandal, in line with its preferred image of being a movement for straight-talking and frequent use of facilitating outrage on social media as a political tactic.

Policy suggestions

- Fines should increase on behaviour such as fly-tipping, littering, playing music out loud on public transport, vandalism and other anti-social behaviour.
- Similarly to being called to jury duty, between the ages of 18 and 30, all citizens should be required to take place in one two-day long deliberative democracy exercise, as deliberative democracy exercises have been shown to have long-term positive impacts on the civility of people's engagement with public debate.¹²⁴⁶
- All social media algorithms should be made transparent, since social media is a major source of uncivil behaviour in the digital public space. This is because even those who start viewing more moderate content are gradually encouraged to move towards more extreme and less civil items, including political extremism, scams and pornography.¹²⁴⁷

Priority eight: Care.

By care, we mean caring about others, and in particular those who are unable to fully take care of themselves – those who are too young, old or ill to do so. Although a crucial actor for their care is the family, the state often does and should support them too to take some of this burden off the shoulders of families.

Care is a facet of conservatism. The late conservative writer Russell Kirk wrote that the object of life is love and that the conservative aspiration is the triumph of love – and care is the essential expression

1246. James Fishkin et al., "Can Deliberation Have Lasting Effects?", *American Political Science Review* (2024), 2000-2020.

1247. Chico Camargo, "YouTube's algorithms might radicalise people – but the real problem is we've no idea how they work", <https://theconversation.com/youtubes-algorithms-might-radicalise-people-but-the-real-problem-is-weve-no-idea-how-they-work-129955> (2020).

of love. Roger Scruton, too, described love as the binding principle of society, while Burke wrote about society that it is a partnership between the dead, the living and the unborn;¹²⁴⁸ indeed, the idea of there being an inter-generational social contract that begins long before one is born and continues long after they die is central to conservatism. But for generations to belong together, they must take care of each other.

This is a sentiment that is largely absent among the populist right. Even among Christian commentators on the populist right – despite Christianity traditionally placing heavy emphasis on care – care and empathy are often seen as undesirable and counter-productive to the pursuit of other, more important goals.¹²⁴⁹ And although the centre-left does often place a lot of emphasis on care, it too is prone to deprioritising it in order to meet other goals, such as equality of outcome; in the most radical cases, left-wing commentators have even suggested that bed-time reading is undesirable, as it entrenches inequalities, since poorer parents are less likely to do it and so children from richer families are likely to be the exclusive recipients of the benefits of bed-time reading.¹²⁵⁰

Policy suggestions

- Make early-years education compulsory from the age of three for a minimum number of hours a week.
- Increase funding for elderly social care through increasing taxes not on work but on assets, specifically income derived from housing and pensions.

Priority nine: Children.

Children and family are at the centre of conservatism. The aforementioned Edmund Burke writes about the family as one of the

1248. Daniel Pitt, “What’s at the core of conservatism? Markets? Aspiration? Opportunity? No: at its beating heart is love, love, love”, <https://conservativehome.com/2015/11/15/dan-pitt-whats-at-the-core-of-conservatism-markets-aspiration-opportunity-no-at-its-beating-heart-is-love-love-love/> (2015).

1249. Julia Carrie Wong, “Loathe thy neighbor: Elon Musk and the Christian right are waging war on empathy”, *The Guardian*, 8 April 2025. Thanks to Timothy Wright for sharing this article with me.

1250. Shlomi Segall, “If you’re a luck egalitarian, how come you read bedtime stories to your children?”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (2011), 23–40.

“little platoon[s],” the “first link in the chain by which we move toward a love to our country and to mankind,” a way of passing on traditions and teaching children virtue.¹²⁵¹

For conservatives, life not centred around serving those platoons will instead likely become a pursuit of material comforts. Conservatives always placed emphasis on the importance of children and family life and should continue to do so today, especially as Europe is facing unprecedented demographic decline.

This is an area that, historically, has been the abode of the centre-right. Christian democracy in particular features support for families with children at the centre of its philosophy,¹²⁵² but non-Christian democratic centre-rights have also consistently promoted family and children above and beyond their political rivals; in France, for example, ironically, the republican pro-*laïcité* centre-right used family policy as a tool to beat and replace the Catholic Church on its own ground.¹²⁵³

On the other hand, for the populist right, family policy has generally not been an area of interest, with the populist right’s bandwidth being dominated by immigration and law and order. The centre-left, on the other hand, has been strongly influenced by twentieth-century feminist thinking which called for the abolition of the family at its most extreme and,¹²⁵⁴ even in its more moderate forms, called for the abolition of marriage because of its patriarchy and pointed to the institution of the family and women’s ability to give birth as a major source of gender inequality.¹²⁵⁵ However, in recent years, there is an increasing risk that policy to support children and families is claimed away from the centre-

1251. Daniel Pitt, “What’s at the core of conservatism? Markets? Aspiration? Opportunity? No: at its beating heart is love, love, love”, <https://conservativehome.com/2015/11/15/dan-pitt-whats-at-the-core-of-conservatism-markets-aspiration-opportunity-no-at-its-beating-heart-is-love-love-love/> (2015).

1252. Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 59-61; Stephen Monsma, *Pluralism and Freedom: Faith-based Organizations in a Democratic Society* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

1253. Ariane Pailhé, Clémentine Rossier and Laurent Toulemon, “French family policy: long tradition and diversified measures”, *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research* (2008), 149-164.

1254. Kathi Weeks, “Abolition of the family: the most infamous feminist proposal”, *Feminist Theory*, 24(3), (2023), 433-453.

1255. Debra Satz, “Feminist Perspectives on Reproduction and the Family” in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2017).

right, with centre-left and populist publications¹²⁵⁶ and politicians¹²⁵⁷ calling for a greater policy focus on the issue of family and children.

Policy suggestions

- Benefits and tax breaks for parents in the earliest years of their children's life should be increased, both to incentivise families to have children and to lower the financial burden on parents in the years when having the child is the costliest.
- Make parental rights, leave and tax breaks transferable to working grandparents.
- Incentivise or even mandate child- and family-friendly planning design, particularly in residential districts in countries where the relevant zoning laws are present. This would involve, among others, walkable, green spaces, playgrounds and lower speed limit.
- Employment law could strengthen flexible working rights, allowing parents to better balance having children with employment, and so decreasing the opportunity cost of having children.
- Ban the sale of smartphones and social media use among children under the age of 16.

Priority ten: Conservation.

By conservation, we mean specifically the conservation of the climate and the natural environment: of its beauty and the crucial role it plays in preserving and facilitating all the activities of human life.

Conservation does lie at the heart of conservatism; the shared etymology is not just accidental. As Dr Daniel Pitt writes, conservation of the natural environment runs “deeply through the conservative tradition from Edmund Burke to Wendall Berry.” Conservatives recognise beauty as something intrinsically valuable and long-standing perceptions of

1256. Aveek Bhattacharya and Phoebe Arslanagié-Little (eds.), “The birth rate challenge: ideas from the left”, <https://www.smfcouk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/The-birth-rate-challenge-Feb-2025.pdf> (2025).

1257. Emma Taggart, “Farage wants a British baby boom – but he’s missing a trick”, *The Telegraph*, 1 June 2025.

beauty as true – and the environment is beautiful, therefore it should be preserved. There is also a lot to be said for conservation by non-cosmopolitans, as their preference for the local over the non-local implies a love for their local environment – a point recognised also by the great conservative thinker Roger Scruton, who wrote that “nobody seems to have identified a motive more likely to serve the environmentalist cause than this one, of the shared love for our home”.¹²⁵⁸ Indeed, Scruton coined his famous term *oikophilia* – love of the home – in a book about conservation, *Green Philosophy: How to think seriously about the planet*.¹²⁵⁹

And the centre-right’s record on conservation is a proud one. One of its strengths in recent years has been its record on conservation; and in particular greening the energy sector. Across our European country studies in this report, annual per capita emissions have, in 2000, averaged 9.4 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent (CO₂e) in the UK; 6.6 tonnes in France; 10.6 tonnes in Germany; 8.2 tonnes in Poland; and 11.5 tonnes in Ireland. Since then, emissions in each of these countries have respectively dropped to 4.4 tonnes of CO₂e; 4.1 tonnes of CO₂e; 7.0 tonnes of CO₂e; 7.8 tonnes of CO₂e; and 6.1 tonnes of CO₂e.¹²⁶⁰ Much of this was achieved under centre-right governments: for example, under the 14-year-long Conservative Government in the UK, annual per capita CO₂e emissions have dropped from 8.0 tonnes to the level they are at today.¹²⁶¹

This is contrasted with the populist right, which is generally disinterested in conservation – or is even opposed to it – and the centre-left, which favours an ineffective policy programme on conservation. The centre-left can seek to drive conservation with the use of restrictive regulation and sacrificing living standards and economic growth – policies which not only harm prosperity but are also ineffective at achieving a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions abroad, which is

1258. Daniel Pitt, “Conservatives need to take back control of environmental politics”, <https://www.cen.uk.com/post/conservatives-need-to-take-back-control-of-environmental-politics> (2025).

1259. Roger Scruton, *Green Philosophy: How to think seriously about the planet* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012).

1260. Our World in Data, “Per capita CO₂ emissions”, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/co-emissions-per-capita> (2025).

1261. Ibid.

necessary for stopping the effects of the environmentally damaging global warming at home. Decarbonising at home is of little help if it does not also come together with global change.

Policy suggestions

- Prioritise increasing incentives for and investment in greener technologies to tackle climate change and biodiversity decline and outcompete non-green technologies; particularly above additional costs and rules for consumers and businesses.
- For countries that have adopted returns agreements with European countries, facilitating the deportation of illegal migrants, European countries should increase green finance for the development of those countries' green infrastructure.
- Commit to enlargement and stronger protections for particularly beautiful and biodiverse areas, such as national parks and marine protected areas.

Conclusion

This report has examined in detail the principles, history and challenges of the European centre-right, especially in the UK, Germany, Poland, France and Ireland. Despite its historic predominance in politics in modern European history, the centre-right is currently struggling. It needs to respond to leading contemporary challenges that threaten the success of both the centre-right movement and the nations which they wish to govern.

It is time for a reboot and reunification of the centre-right across Europe, to defeat the populist right and statist centre-left. That requires distinctive priorities and effective policies – rooted in historical principles – so the centre-right can return again to be the engine of peace and prosperity across Europe. This report offers a rallying cry for centre-right Europeans to come together to win and deliver again.

Annex:

Chart methodology for Chapter Two

All the questions and data used are available here:

Seth Jolly et al., “Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019”, *Electoral Studies* 75 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420>.

Seth Jolly et al., “25 Years of Political Party Positions in Europe: The Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 1999-2024,” working paper, <https://www.chesdata.eu/ches-europe>.

For all Charts, the following question was used to determine positions on the x-axis:

Position of the party in *the year of the survey* in terms of its overall ideological stance.

0 = Extreme left

5 = Centre

10 = Extreme right

For Chart 2.1, the following questions were used to determine positions on the y-axis:

Salience of anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric.

0 = Not important at all

10 = Extremely important

How salient has anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric been to each party during 2024?

0 = not important at all

10 = extremely important

For Chart 2.2, the following questions were used to determine positions on the y-axis, with higher values indicating greater opposition to radical change:

Position of the party in 2019 in terms of their views on social and cultural values. “Libertarian” or “postmaterialist” parties favor expanded personal freedoms, for example, abortion rights, divorce, and same-sex marriage. “Traditional” or “authoritarian” parties reject these ideas in favor of order, tradition, and stability, believing that the government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues.

0 = Libertarian/Postmaterialist

5 = Centre

10 = Traditional/Authoritarian

Position on social lifestyle.

0 = Strongly supports liberal policies

10 = Strongly opposes liberal policies

Position on role of religious principles in politics.

0 = Strongly opposes religious principles in politics

10 = Strongly supports religious principles in politics

For Chart 2.3, the following questions were used to determine positions on the y-axis, with higher values indicating greater support for non-cosmopolitanism:

Position towards trade liberalization/protectionism.

0 = Strongly favors trade liberalization

10 = Strongly favors protection of domestic producers

Position towards cosmopolitanism vs. nationalism.

0 = Strongly promotes cosmopolitan conceptions of society

10 = Strongly promotes nationalist conceptions of society

Position on immigration policy.

0 = Strongly favors a liberal policy on immigration.

10 = Strongly favors a restrictive policy on immigration.

Position on integration of immigrants and asylum seekers (multiculturalism vs. assimilation).

0 = Strongly favors multiculturalism

10 = Strongly favors assimilation

Position on political decentralization to regions/localities.

0 = Strongly favors political decentralization

10 = Strongly opposes political decentralization*

*For this question, we wanted the 0 and 10 values substituted, for higher values to still indicate greater support for non-cosmopolitanism, therefore we modified all results using the formula $x = \text{ABS}(10 - \text{original result})$.

For Chart 2.4., the following questions were used to determine positions on the y-axis, with higher values indicating greater support for economic liberalism:

Position on state intervention in the economy.

0 = Fully in favor of state intervention

10 = Fully opposed to state intervention

Position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor.

0 = Strongly favors redistribution

10 = Strongly opposes redistribution

Position on deregulation of markets.

0 = Strongly opposes deregulation of markets

10 = Strongly supports deregulation of markets

Position on improving public services vs. reducing taxes.

0 = Strongly favors improving public services

10 = Strongly favors reducing taxes



For much of the postwar era, centre-right political parties dominated European parliaments. They benefited from and presided over strong economic growth, rising living standards and relatively generous social security systems. But today they are struggling, facing challenges to their political survival and the national interest.

It is time for a reboot and reunification of the centre-right across Europe, to defeat the populist right and statist centre-left.

This report seeks to better define and shape the centre-right across Europe. It does so by detailing the history, principles, policies and challenges of the main political parties and traditions of the centre-right across Europe before providing distinctive priorities and effective policies so the centre-right can return again to be the engine of peace and prosperity across Europe.

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