



## **The retreat of the west**

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The Retreat of the West

Peter Trubowitz  
London School of Economics  
[p.trubowitz@lse.ac.uk](mailto:p.trubowitz@lse.ac.uk)

Brian Burgoon  
University of Amsterdam  
[B.M.Burgoon@uva.nl](mailto:B.M.Burgoon@uva.nl)

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– Abstract –

The West is turning inward. Donald Trump’s presidency, Britain’s decision to leave the European Union, and the spread of populist parties in Europe are the most visible signs of this retreat. The shift is not as recent as these examples suggest, however. In this paper, we show that Western governments’ support for liberal internationalism has been receding in important ways for over fifteen years, and argue that this trend is best understood as part of a larger “hollowing out” of the political center in Western democracies. Drawing on an array of cross-national data for industrialized democracies and for hundreds of political parties in those democracies, we document the erosion of Western government and party support for liberal internationalism from its Cold War apex, through the 2008 global economic downturn, and to the present. We show that this erosion in Western governments’ support for liberal internationalism corresponds to a steady weakening of mainstream parties’ electoral strength across OECD countries, and hence, to their declining policy-making influence. The erosion of the “vital center” has opened up political space for radical-right and radical-left parties which have been the vehicles of the current backlash against liberal internationalism. We discuss the implications of these trends for the future of the Western liberal international order and strategies now on offer to repair it.

Is the West in retreat? Is the era of Western liberal dominance led by a preeminent America over? While it is premature to declare that the era of Western ascendancy is over, domestic support for liberal internationalism is weakening across the West. On issues ranging from immigration, to international trade, to national security, new political parties on the left as well as the right are rejecting core principles of liberal internationalism that have long united Western democracies. Radical-left and the radical-right parties are offering alternative, divisive foreign policies and party platforms. Established mainstream political parties – social democratic, Christian democratic, and conservative and liberal – long the backbone of the West’s defense against illiberalism from abroad, are now on the political defensive. Older parties are groping for answers to challenges to the liberal international order that are home-grown, and that show little sign of easing anytime soon. Few international relations scholars or foreign policy analysts imagined such scenarios even a few years ago.

Much of the debate over the West’s future has focused on recent changes: Donald Trump’s presidency, Britain’s decision to leave the European Union, and the surge of nationalist sentiment in France, Germany and other Western democracies. We show that the decline in support for liberal internationalism is not as recent as these examples suggest. An array of cross-national data on thirty countries and hundreds of political parties shows clearly that Western government support for liberal internationalism has been receding for over twenty years. In this paper, we analyze changes in the level and nature of Western support from the Cold War apex of liberal internationalism in 1970 through the 2010s and interrogate the domestic political and partisan causes and consequences of the decline that set in during the 1990s. We show that Western democracies’ commitment to liberal internationalism was far more dependent on mainstream political parties’ electoral clout than previously understood. As these parties weakened, so did Western governments’ support for liberal internationalist foreign economic policy and security policies. The populist backlash against mainstream parties that we see today represents an intensification of a process that has been visible across the OECD since the 1990s.

In making this argument, we model Western democracies’ commitment to liberal internationalism along two separate but related foreign policy dimensions, which we call “power” and “partnership.” By power, we mean national governments’ policy commitment to invest domestic resources in national militaries and defense capabilities in cooperation with other countries of the West. By partnership, we mean investment in a shared commitment to economic openness, institutionalized cooperation, and multilateral governance. Using this two-dimensional model, we show that the defining feature of liberal internationalism during the Cold War was Western democracies’ commitment to *both* power and partnership. It is this

double commitment that has unraveled since the Cold War ended. Western democracies' support for power and more recently, for partnership, has weakened. We track this erosion of support for liberal internationalism and show that what is true of Western democracies in general is also true of the West's preeminent power: America.

A variety of cross-national data characterizing the foreign policy orientations of Western democracies support these arguments about the erosion of support for liberal internationalism. These include indicators measuring national spending on guns and butter, as well as various indices measuring the degree to which national policies promote international economic openness, membership in international organizations, participation in collective security missions, among others. We rely on party manifesto and electoral data to measure political party and electoral support for these liberal internationalist policies across more than five decades and over two-dozen OECD countries. Taken together, these measures allow us to track correlations between the erosion in Western governments' policy commitment to liberal internationalism and the electoral decline of the mainstream political parties that have been the institutional locus and agents of liberal internationalist commitments and policies.

The analysis reveals two important patterns. First, we show that Western governments' support for both power and partnership has weakened and that this process began shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It accelerated in the 1990s. In the Cold War era, most of the advanced industrial democracies of Asia, Europe, and North America shared a vision of liberal international order that rested on a commitment to investing in both military power and international partnership. By contrast, since the end of the Cold War, Western democracies have relied increasingly on economic openness, institutionalized cooperation, and multilateral governance or what we call here "globalism" to solidify gains, and to expand the West's influence into new regions and territories of the globe (e.g., China). Western reliance on globalism peaked in the early 2000s. Since then, and especially since the 2008 economic crash, Western governments' investment in globalism has also slowed and, as we show, in many cases weakened and declined.

Second, our analysis shows that the strength of mainstream parties is a leading indicator of the liberal international order's vigor and wellbeing. Strong mainstream party support was essential to sustaining the Western liberal international order built after World War II. Mainstream parties were committed to investing in both power and partnership. Their electoral dominance made it politically possible for Western leaders to advance the liberal internationalist project. However, since the end of the Cold War mainstream parties across the West have steadily lost electoral ground to non-mainstream parties that oppose investing in

international partnership or military power, or both. As this process has intensified, Western leaders' willingness and ability to invest in liberal international order-building has weakened. In short, we show that the erosion of Western democracies' institutional capacity goes far in explaining their retreat from liberal internationalism.

The paper is organized into five sections. The first section sketches out our framework for analyzing Western domestic support for liberal internationalism. It describes our methodology for measuring changes in that commitment at the level of government policy over time and across space. In section two, we show that overall *government support* for liberal internationalism in the Western democracies has stalled and in important ways has declined over the past twenty-five years. In the third section, we examine *Western party support* for liberal internationalism by party type. We show that party support for liberal internationalism is consistently higher among mainstream political parties than it is among parties on the radical left and radical right. Section 4 examines the hollowing out of the political center and its effects on liberal internationalism. Lagged regression models provide support for the argument that the erosion of support for Western governments' support for liberal internationalism is driven by declining electoral support for mainstream parties. We conclude by considering the implications of our findings for the future of the Western liberal international order and strategies now on offer to repair it.

#### Power, partnership, and international order

Fifteen years ago, Robert Kagan challenged the widely-held notion that the West shared a common view of liberal international order-building (Kagan, 2002). Americans, Kagan argued, were more apt to rely on power and coercion to promote international order. By contrast, Europeans preferred diplomacy, negotiation, and partnership. Ever since, international relations scholars and foreign policy analysts have debated the extent of Western differences over liberal internationalism and how best to characterize them – as a clash of ideas, or interests, or, as Kagan suggested, values (Cooper 2000; Dorman and Kaufman, 2011; Everts, 2001; Kagan 2002; Lindberg, 2005). Most of these efforts, including Kagan's own formulation, assume, implicitly or explicitly, that Western views of order-building can best be represented along a single-continuum: power versus diplomacy, unilateralism versus multilateralism, modernity versus post-modernity, among others.

One-dimensional models like Kagan's are suggestive, but they presuppose high levels of global engagement. In Kagan's model, what distinguishes Western nations from one another is not the *level* of support for international engagement, but the *type* of engagement and leadership they favor. Americans, Kagan argues, are more likely to invest in military

power to manage international problems. Europeans prefer diplomacy and negotiation to power politics. Yet as suggested by Donald Trump’s “America First” credo, Britain’s Brexit vote, and the surge in support for populist parties in Europe, many Western politicians and their followers do not favor international engagement across the board. These politicians see no intrinsic value in policies that actively promote freer trade, open immigration, common defense, and other features of the liberal international order. The existing models leave little room for movements like these which oppose deep international engagement. The nationalist and populist surge thus exposes the limits of models of Western countries’ foreign policies like Kagan’s, which focus only on different understandings of internationalism, but not support for or opposition to it.

We argue that to model the political dynamics driving the current debate over the future of the West, internationalism itself should be conceptualized along two separate dimensions (Trubowitz, 2015). We call these power and partnership, as in Figure 1. Here, the horizontal dimension measures the extent to which Western democracies invest domestic resources in building up national militaries and national defense capabilities and maintaining military preparedness. The vertical dimension measures the extent to which Western governments and their publics are committed to international economic openness, institutionalized cooperation, and multilateral governance. This two-dimensional model yields four combinations of what can be conceptualized as varying degrees of “power and partnership”: (1) “partnership over power” (quadrant I), (2) “power plus partnership” (quadrant II), (3) “neither power nor partnership” (quadrant III), and (4) “power over partnership” (quadrant IV). Figure 1 summarizes these four ideal types, or “varieties of internationalism.” We briefly describe each type, starting with “globalists” in quadrant 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

Globalists favor partnership over power. They view power politics, militarism, and nationalism as root causes of international instability and war, and see international openness and international institutions as means to curb nationalist passions and hegemonic ambitions. Investing in partnership fosters peaceful relations, promotes commerce, and spreads liberal values, or so globalists argue (Angell, 1912; Held, 1995). Robert Cooper characterizes contemporary Western democracies that subscribe to these liberal principles and Kantian ideals as “postmodern” – postmodern because they rely on “moral consciousness,” the rule of law, and institutionalized cooperation instead of traditional *raison d’etat*, military strength,

and balance of power to manage the risks and uncertainties associated with international anarchy (Cooper, 2000). States that locate themselves in this quadrant invest fewer resources in military power and except in cases of human rights, are reluctant to use it. Woodrow Wilson's failed plan for building an open international order of law and institutions was an early attempt at this approach to international order-building. Today's supranational European Union, which pools sovereignty and guarantees the free movement of goods, capital, services, and people, stands as its greatest achievement (Birchfield, Krige, and Young, 2017).

If globalists favor partnership over power, liberal internationalists (quadrant 2) seek to fuse the two into one. They too see international openness and institutionalized cooperation as means to tame national ambition, encourage restraint, and foster community. Yet liberal internationalists also think power has its place, and they are not reluctant to use it to defend national borders, balance against foreign threats, or promote democratic values (Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007). In a world of sovereign states, liberal internationalists do not think the Hobbesian challenges of preserving security can be solved, but they think those challenges can be managed if partnership is combined with power. As John Ikenberry has persuasively argued, this very intuition lies at the core of the liberal international order that the West built after World War II, and in the thinking of its chief architect, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Ikenberry, 2009). Scholars and policy-makers who associate liberal internationalism with globalism are thus not wrong. Liberal internationalism does entail a commitment to multilateral governance, along with international openness (Hoffman, 1995). But for much of the post-World War II era, liberal internationalism also involved a commitment to invest in national military power as a complement to international partnership. Indeed, this dual commitment to power and partnership is liberal internationalism's distinguishing feature (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016; Kupchan and Trubowitz, 2007).

In contrast to liberal internationalists, isolationists (quadrant 3) are deeply skeptical of international institutions and multilateral governance. At best, they see international institutions as irrelevant; at worst, they consider them as a threat to national sovereignty. Isolationists also take a dim view of large armies, seeing high costs in terms of butter (or higher taxes) and unnecessary risks, be it centralized power, or imperial ambition, or strategic overexpansion. In principle, isolationists oppose or are deeply skeptical of both power and partnership (Gholz, Press and Sapolsky, 2007; Posen, 2014; Sapolsky et al., 2009). However, in the real world, this "ideal point" is nearly impossible to achieve. Even Japan's extreme, wrenching inward during the Tokugawa era did not result in out-and-out closure (Legro, 2005, 125-27; Samuels, 1996, 33-35). As a practical matter, isolationists often find themselves playing defense, looking for ways to manage international involvement with the



least possible risk and cost (e.g. Nordlinger 1996). In the American context, isolationism is most closely identified with Thomas Jefferson and his vision of a national “empire of liberty,” free of standing armies and entangling alliances that were commonplace in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe (Tucker and Hendrickson 1989). Today, libertarians are its principal champions.

Nationalists (quadrant 4) share isolationists’ aversion to international partnership. They think first and foremost about national sovereignty. However, unlike isolationists, who worry as much about the dangers of militarism as the risks of pooling sovereignty, nationalists strongly support building and maintaining large armies. They are also not hesitant to use firepower to protect vital *national* interests: territorial boundaries; spheres-of-influence; core economic interests (e.g., export markets, trade routes, raw materials). As John Mearsheimer points out, in this crucial respect, nationalists are “kissing cousins” of realists (Mearsheimer 2011, 2018). Populists like France’s Marine Le Pen belong in this nationalist quadrant. In her run for the French presidency, she vowed to boost France’s defense spending to 3 percent of GDP while liberating it from the “tyrannies” of globalization and the European Union (Henley, 2007). Donald Trump, whose foreign policy evokes comparisons to the country’s first populist president, Andrew Jackson, belongs here, too (Mead, 2017). Like Jackson, Trump sees military power the way he sees economic power: as a means to promote narrowly defined national interests.

#### The retreat from liberal internationalism

We use this conceptual framework to map out Western democracies’ foreign policy preferences and consider whether they have changed over time, and if so, along which two underlying dimensions. To this end, we constructed government policy output indicators for power and partnership for 30 OECD countries.<sup>1</sup> For *power*, we rely on total national defense expenditure (share of GDP), a widely used indicator to assess Western democracies’ willingness to invest in military power and the common defense (SIPRI 2018).<sup>2</sup> For

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<sup>1</sup> The “West” countries on which we focus include Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States. We exclude the Central and Eastern European economies as they joined the West only after the Cold War.

<sup>2</sup> Military spending as a share of GDP figures prominently in national election campaigns and public debate about “burden sharing.” We treat this as a proxy for military preparedness and resource commitments. This measure does not provide explicit information about actual military missions, deployments, and use of force. But scholars and policy analysts regularly focus on this indicator to compare national investments in military power. In our inferential analyses below we also consider alternative specifications, particularly spending per capita, yielding patterns that corroborate our baseline focus on share of GDP.

*partnership*, we rely on KOF Swiss Economic Institute indices measuring government *policies* to promote and regulate economic and political globalization (Dreher 2006; Gygli et al. 2019).<sup>3</sup> KOF's economic globalization policy index monitors variations in tariff rates, trade regulations and taxes, capital account openness, and foreign investment agreements – policy tools that governments use to stimulate or restrict cross-border flows of goods, capital, services.<sup>4</sup> KOF's political globalization policy index measures country membership in international organizations, signed international treaties, and how multilateral its treaties are.<sup>5</sup> Together, they capture the extent to which a country invests in institutional cooperation and multilateral governance. Our partnership measure is a weighted index of these two KOF indices from 1970 through 2016, the most recent available year<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2 summarizes the results of our aggregated and longitudinal analysis of Western democracies' support for power and partnership. The horizontal axis represents the level of Western government support for military expenditure (power). The vertical axis represents the level of Western government policy support for economic and political globalization (partnership). To provide reference points, we set the axes in Figure 2 using the full-sample medians with respect to the spatial distribution of countries (110 total in the sample) and time-period (1970-2016). These yield rough approximations of the four quadrants discussed in Figure 1 above. For ease of visual interpretation, we label the four combinations of power and partnership in the corners of their respective quadrants in Figure 2. While the KOF data does not cover the entire post-World War II era, it does span enough of that era to enable us to compare and contrast Western democracies' support for liberal internationalist policies during and after the Cold War.

[Figure 2 about here]

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<sup>3</sup> KOF's widely-used and cited database includes a range of policy and flow measures of globalization for more than 200 countries and territories over the period 1970 to 2016. Here we use only those measures representing national government policies that enable or constrain economic and political globalization – measures that the current version of the dataset refers to as “*de jure*” as opposed to “*de facto*” measures that represent actual cross-border flows and actions.

<sup>4</sup> Our indices exclude the dataset's economic data on actual flows of trade, foreign direct investment and migration, and also measures of socio-cultural globalization.

<sup>5</sup> Treaty party diversity measures how multilateral a country's investment treaties are.

<sup>6</sup> There are many ways of aggregating, normalizing and weighting the various components. Our baseline simply adds these two KOF indices, providing an intuitive composite measure of global engagement and international cooperation and the pooling (sacrificing) of national sovereignty.

Figure 2 broadly conforms to expectations. During the 1970s and 1980s, the West as a whole clearly favored an approach to international order-building that relied *equally* on military power and international partnership. It is located in the top right quadrant. The Western liberal internationalist consensus that international relations scholars date to the late 1940s was thus still largely intact by the early 1980s, having survived the tumultuous 1960s and what Samuel Huntington and others called, the “crisis of democracy” in the 1970s (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki, 1975). During the 1970s and 1980s, Western governments continued to invest, in military preparedness, forward defense, and power projection, albeit at a lower rate.<sup>7</sup> Western democracies’ commitment to greater international openness institutionalized cooperation kept pace and substantially deepened. Successive rounds of multilateral trade negotiations (e.g., 1963-67 Kennedy Round; 1973-79 Tokyo Round) expanded the number of countries in the liberal internationalist economic fold. And most Western polities significantly increased their diplomatic presence and participation in proliferating multilateral political and economic agreements on issues ranging from banking, to fisheries, to water management.

In the 1990s, the West’s commitment to liberal internationalism began to weaken. As Figure 2 reveals, the center of gravity in the West shifts from upper right quadrant to the upper left quadrant. This process began in earnest as the Cold War was ending and the so-called “second wave of economic globalization” was reaching new heights. The collapse of the Soviet empire allowed Western governments to begin reducing the share of GDP they invested in national and collective defense. The pace of decline in defense spending in the decades after the Cold War was substantially higher at any point since the end of World War II. Between 1990 and 2016, the average level of defense spending as a percentage of GDP in Western democracies dropped from 2.5 percent to 1.4 percent. Less power on average did not mean less partnership, however. Western capitals greatly expanded policy “investment” in partnership in the 1990s, gradually at first and then rapidly (Pevehouse, Nordstrom, and Warnke, 2004; Blyth, 2002). By the time the World Trade Organization was established in 1995, the center of political gravity in the West had shifted from liberal internationalism (quadrant 2) to globalism (quadrant 1). Indeed, after 1989 policy support for economic and political globalization significantly accelerated (Gygli et al., 2019, 562).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> During the 1970s and 1980s, average defense spending in the West was 2.8 percent of GDP. This compares to an average of 3.9 percent of GDP in the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>8</sup> Between the mid-1980s and late-2000s, the number of international governmental organizations more than doubled, from 3,546 in 1985 to 7,459 in 2008. Western governments accounted for the lion’s share of the increase (Bloodgood, 2016).

Western investment in international partnership reached its apex in the early 2000s. Since then, government support for partnership has weakened as a growing number of Western capitals have re-imposed capital controls and new trade restrictions (e.g. local content requirements, export taxes and quotas, public procurement discrimination), while reducing (or at least, not expanding) their commitments to international institutions (Hufbauer and Jung, 2016). This is depicted in Figure 2 as downward movement in the country scores for support for international partnership. To be sure, the West's commitment to partnership remains high. But the erosion in government support for greater economic openness and institutionalized cooperation is significant. Moreover, the retreat from the high-water mark of globalism in the early 2000s begins before the 2008 global economic crash and the associated slow-down in international commerce and economic exchange. In short, the weakening of Western government support for globalization and institutionalized cooperation begins long before the recent surge in populism and cannot be explained by the 2008 economic crisis alone.

Is what is true of the West as a whole also true of its two most influential actors: the European Union and the United States? Figure 3 reports the results for the EU and the U.S. We also include Japan for comparative purposes, given that the Japanese Constitution prohibits levels of military investment comparable to most Western countries.<sup>9</sup> We see in Figure 3 that over the entire time period (1970-2016), there is very little distance between the EU and the U.S. over international partnership (vertical dimension), and that the distance between them on the horizontal dimension (military power) narrows over time.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the EU and U.S. move away from liberal internationalism toward globalism in the 1990s and early 2000s. A retreat from globalism follows in the 2000s and 2010s, even more starkly for the EU and the U.S. than the West as a whole (Figure 2). While Washington never fully embraces globalism, its commitment to liberal internationalism (power plus partnership) is considerably weaker in the 2000s than it was in the 1970s. As expected, Japan's trajectory is different, at least when it comes to military power. Japanese investment in power is extremely low by Western standards. Yet like the EU and the U.S., Japan increased its investment in partnership over time, dramatically so since the end of the Cold War.

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<sup>9</sup> Our expectation is that Japan's positioning in the Euclidian space will differ on this dimension from the EU and U.S.

<sup>10</sup> These patterns hold with respect to the broader national-level sample and with respect to formal measures, such as Euclidean distance between the points in the Figure 2 matrix or coefficients of variation. Between 1970 and 2016, for instance, we see an increase (36%) in the coefficient of variation in military spending among the sample countries, while over the same period there is a large drop (67%) in the coefficient of variation in international partnership.

[Figure 3 about here]

Taken together, the patterns in Figures 2 and 3 tell us three important things. First, the analysis makes clear that there was a Western consensus in favor of both power and partnership, even if it was not fully embraced by all Western governments (e.g., Japan). Second, this Western consensus lasted into the 1980s, when it began to fray. On the one hand, Western governments began investing significantly less in military power, a pattern that has continued to the present. On the other hand, government support for partnership increased substantially as Western democracies came to rely on globalization and multilateral governance to achieve their policy goals. Finally, for well over a decade, most Western governments (again, Japan is an exception) have been gradually retreating from globalism. Restrictions on trade and capital mobility have increased while membership and participation in international organizations and missions has decreased. As we show in the next two sections, one reason why is that liberal internationalism's institutional supports in Western democracies have weakened.

#### Liberal internationalism and party politics

In 1949, the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. published *The Vital Center* – one of his most enduring works (Schlesinger, 1949). Often remembered as an appeal for bipartisanship, the term “vital center” actually referred to a middle point on the political spectrum, lying between radical-left politics and radical right-wing parties. Schlesinger saw mainstream parties of the late 1940s as Cold War liberalism's best defense against Soviet-style communism on the left and the fascism that gripped Europe in the 1930s. Schlesinger was writing about the United States, but his view that mainstream parties offered the best defense against political extremism could just as easily have been written about the political landscape in Europe. As we show in this section, mainstream parties have also been liberal internationalism's staunchest advocates, opposing the pacifism and “one-worldism” of the left and the narrow nationalism and xenophobia of the right.

Our analysis draws on the Manifesto Project data base. This is a widely-used database of political manifestos (party platforms) for individual political parties, by country and by election year (c.f. Budge et.al. 2001; Klingemann et.al. 2006; Benoit et.al. 2009).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The limits and strengths of this particular measurement instrument with respect to validity have been widely discussed and debated. To capture specific party-political sentiments, one can take advantage

The *Manifesto* database includes all OECD countries and over 455 political parties from 1970 to 2017. The coding unit in *Manifesto* is the number of sentences or sentence fragments (quasi-sentences) in party platforms that give attention to or take a position on a particular issue (e.g., trade, military preparedness, immigration). Here we focus on the variables that include a pro- and an anti-position taken on issues relevant to military power or international partnership. This allows us to measure the broad salience of a given issue in a party's platform, as well as to gauge the level of support for or opposition to a given position (e.g., for or against more open trade) by individual party and more importantly for our purposes, by party type or family.

Our *Manifesto* measure of "military power" refers to the percentage of total sentences or quasi-sentences in favor of military preparedness (spending), military engagement (deployment), and the disposition of armed forces generally (force posture) *minus* the percentage of statements expressing doubt and criticism of military preparedness, military engagement, and armed forces.<sup>12</sup> Our "international partnership" support measure is equally broad and inclusive. It refers to the percentage of total sentences or quasi-sentences expressing support for general internationalism, free trade (low trade protectionism) and the European Union *minus* the percentage of (quasi-) sentences expressing opposition to each (Burgoon, 2009, 2013).<sup>13</sup> This net measure includes every reference to globalism and international engagement and cooperation in the *Manifesto* database.<sup>14</sup>

We use these measures to determine whether mainstream political parties are significantly more supportive of liberal internationalism than political parties located on the far left or far right of the political spectrum. Following many others, we define mainstream parties as those that are considered center-left to center-right ideologically (Huber and Inglehardt, 1995; Mair, 1997). These include Social Democratic, "Liberal," Christian Democratic, and Conservative parties. We classify parties whose ideological positions fall to the extreme left or extreme right as non-mainstream parties or "radical left" and "radical right," respectively (Rooduijn et al., 2018; Mudde, 2009; March and Mudde, 2013). On the

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of the fact that the manifesto coding includes positive and negative sentiments that can off-set from one another (c.f. Milner and Judkins, 2004; Burgoon, 2009)

<sup>12</sup> The power percentage is based on the difference between *Manifesto* codes (per104) and (per105).

<sup>13</sup> The partnership percentage is based on the difference between *Manifesto* codes (per107 + per108 + per407) and (per109 + per110 + per406). For a discussion of this measure, see Burgoon (2009, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Appendix Figure A1 highlights the evolution of average party-system support for "partnership" and "power" using our *Manifesto* measures in the West generally, and in the United States, EU-15 and Japan in particular. We take the average party positions for all parties in a country's party system in a given election year. This reveals a good deal about party-system dynamics, but our interest here is mainly in measuring the differences *across* party families within the West.

left these include political parties usually associated with communist or post-communist ideologies (e.g., Spain's Podemos; Germany's The Left; Italy's Five Star Movement). On the right, it includes parties associated with nationalist and/or populist appeals to nativism, traditionalism, and statism (e.g., France's National Front; Austria's Freedom Party; Denmark's People's Party).

Figure 4 summarizes the policy preferences of these party families for partnership (left-side) and power (right-side). Summary box plots capture the distribution in support for partnership and power by party type and over time. The white horizontal lines represent the sample medians for each party type. The dark-shaded boxes capture the lower 25<sup>th</sup> and upper 75<sup>th</sup> percentile in the distribution (the 'interquartile range'). The 'whiskers' represent the lowest and highest adjacent values, respectively (outliers beyond these values are not shown).<sup>15</sup> The first row of box plots in Figure 4 shows the pattern for the full sample of OECD countries, for the entire period under examination here (1970 to 2017). To determine whether the cross-sectional pattern shifted after the Cold War ended, Figure 4 also breaks the party-type distributions down by sub-period: 1970-1989 (second row of box plots); 1990-2017 (third row of box plots). The patterns revealed in Figure 4 are borne out in a fuller regression analysis of all parties (see Appendix Table A1).

[Figure 4 about here]

With respect to international partnership (left-hand panels), we see a clear and consistent curvilinear, inverted-U pattern, where radical-left and radical-right parties tend to be less supportive of (net) partnership than are mainstream parties. This is especially true of radical-right parties, which consistently oppose partnership: the sample median party-year is below 0 in all three box plots in Figure 4. Radical-right manifestos contain proportionately more anti-trade, anti-EU, anti-internationalism and anti-multilateralism statements than statements in support. By contrast, mainstream parties are more supportive of partnership. As Figure 4 indicates, their party platforms are proportionately more positive than negative about free trade, international institutions, and multilateral governance. Moreover, despite many differences over economic and social policy, the mainstream parties disagree only modestly among themselves over whether to invest in international partnership. This inverted-U pattern

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<sup>15</sup> The 'adjacent values' are those outlier observations that fall outside the upper and lower quartiles defining the 'interquartile range' (IQR). This is, formally, observations that fall at or beyond the lower and upper whiskers, where: Lower whisker=Q1 - 1.5 IQR; and Upper whisker=Q4 + 1.5 IQR.

is stable across the three box plots in Figure 4, though after the Cold War radical-left parties do become more supportive of international partnership while radical-right parties become less supportive.<sup>16</sup>

The story of party support for military power (support for military spending, expansion or preparedness, minus opposition to each) is simpler. We see a more “monotonic” (rather than curvilinear) distribution as we move from the radical-left, through the mainstream parties, to the radical-right. Radical-left parties’ platforms reveal that they are significantly less inclined to support investing in military power than are mainstream parties. By contrast, radical right parties are more likely to support investing in military power than most mainstream parties. The only exception are mainstream Conservative parties which are as bullish on military spending as radical-right parties. As Figure 4 indicates, this pattern has not changed much over time. While there is some increase in support for military power expressed in the full-sample averages of each party family, radical-right parties are consistently the most supportive of investing in military power. Conversely, radical-left parties are the parties most strongly opposed to military spending.<sup>17</sup>

Our analysis of Western party support for liberal internationalism largely confirms the analysis of Western government support above. The Western consensus in favor of liberal internationalism during the Cold War existed at the level of party politics as well as at the level of government policy. Mainstream parties that made up the West’s “vital center” strongly favored investing in both power and partnership. This pattern has continued during the post-Cold War era. Mainstream parties remain liberal internationalism’s staunchest supporters; radical-left and radical-right parties, dedicated foes. Yet Western democracies are less willing today to invest resources into power and partnership: Western government support is a pale shadow of what it was during the Cold War. In the next section, we show that much of the explanation for the West’s retreat from liberal-internationalism lies in the decline of its mainstream parties.

### The Decline of the Vital Center

During the Cold War mainstream parties dominated the electoral landscape (Budge and Laver, 1992; Rokkan and Lipset, 1967). Even in Europe, where communist parties were competitive, mainstream parties captured, on average, 70 to 75 percent of the vote during the

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<sup>16</sup> Fuller analysis of the 1970-2017 period is reported in Appendix Figure A2. It bears out the over-time pattern reported here. Throughout the 1970-2017 period, mainstream parties are more supportive of partnership than the radical extremes. Radical right parties are more opposed to partnership over time; radical left parties are slightly more supportive.

<sup>17</sup> More detailed, year-by-year analysis reported in Appendix Figure A2 supports this conclusion.



1970s and 1980s. Their dominance all but guaranteed broad and consistent domestic support for liberal internationalism. Across the West, liberal internationalists were well placed in the highest reaches of national government to frame public debate, influence foreign policy-making, and keep nationalist and populist pressures in check (Martill, 2019). Mainstream parties had solid bases in national legislatures and electorates. As mainstream parties have lost electoral ground to left-wing and right-wing parties, Western governments have found it harder politically to press the case for investing in liberal internationalism. Opponents of liberal internationalism have grown stronger and Western voters have grown more sensitive to liberal internationalism's cost in terms of economic security and national sovereignty.

We develop this argument about liberal internationalism's domestic bases here in two separate, but related ways. First, we compare the electoral fortunes of mainstream parties against those of radical-left and radical-right parties from 1970 through 2017. The larger (smaller) mainstream parties' *relative* vote share is in country  $X$ , the more (less) legislative backing or capacity we anticipate that country  $X$ 's political leaders will have to invest consistently and programmatically in liberal internationalist policies. Second, we weight party platform support for power and partnership by party vote share in each of the 30 OECD countries in our sample (1970-2017). We treat this measure as a proxy of the voting public's support for political parties advocating liberal internationalism and more generally, the depth of support for liberal internationalism in Western democracies. Higher (lower) levels of voter support for parties advancing liberal internationalist policies should, all things equal, result in stronger (weaker) government support for those policies.

In Figures 5 and 6, we focus on aggregate Western results, plotting three indicators: a first indicator (darkest of the lines) that measures the level of government support (*government policy support*) for international partnership (Figure 5) and military power (in Figure 6), the same measures displayed in Figure 2 above; a second indicator (the broken lines) that measures the national electoral vote share for mainstream parties *minus* the national electoral vote share for radical-left and for radical-right parties (we call this *mainstream vote share*); and a third indicator (in the grey lines) measuring party manifesto scores for international partnership and military power weighted by parties' actual electoral vote share (what we call here *weighted manifesto score*).<sup>18</sup> Our expectation is that both *mainstream vote share* and *weighted manifesto score* will correlate positively with actual government policy outcomes. Because it takes time for these electoral dynamics to make

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<sup>18</sup> The *mainstream vote share* and *weighted manifesto score* are based on linear interpolation between a given party's or country-year's raw data for a given election-year.

themselves felt at the level of national government policy, one can incorporate time lags into the analysis, and this we do in the inferential analysis below. We rely here on these aggregate, average indicators for the West, though the story finds support in more fine-grained individual country breakdowns (see Appendix Figure A3) and in fuller regression analysis (see Appendix Table A2 and discussion below).

[Figures 5 and 6 about here]

We begin by noting that the most aggregated descriptive patterns in Figure 5 conform to our expectations. During the Cold War, *mainstream vote share* and especially, *weighted manifesto score* for partnership were leading indicators of Western *government policy support* for international partnership. That pattern continued until the end of the Cold War. Western *government policy support* for international partnership continued to rise through the 1990s and into the 2000s. However, during the same period mainstream political parties began to lose electoral market share to radical-right and radical-left parties. This process accelerated in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, as mainstream parties' share of the electoral vote has declined rapidly from one election to the next. While this has not led Western democracies to retreat wholesale from policies promoting greater economic interdependence and institutionalized cooperation, government support for international partnership has cooled considerably since its peak in the early 2000s. In contrast to the Cold War era, when Western government support for international partnership increased most years, there has been little change since the turn of the millennium.

Figure 5 also makes clear that political parties advocating globalization and multilateral governance have paid a hefty price at the ballot box. Since the early 1990s, political parties advocating international partnership have lost electoral ground to radical-left and radical-right parties. In fact, the pattern of decline closely parallels the dramatic downward trend in electoral support for mainstream parties. This has resulted in a sizeable and growing gap in support for international partnership between Western governments and their voting publics. While government support for globalization, international institutions, and multilateral governance has continued, Western public support for parties advocating those policies has fallen off sharply since the 1990s, and especially since the 2008 global economic crisis. In contrast to the Cold War years, when Western leaders could invest in international partnership knowing that that it would enjoy broad political support, today

political leaders who favor globalization and multilateral governance do so at their political peril.

The pattern with respect military power in Figure 6 is less clear cut, at least since the fall of the Berlin Wall. During the Cold War, Western political leaders who invested GDP in military power could do so knowing that they had the support of mainstream parties (though as Figure 6 indicates, not always their voting publics). This lasted until the collapse of the Soviet empire. Since then, Western investment in military power as a share of GDP has fallen. Indeed, the decline in Western support for military spending has been so steady that since 2000, public support for military spending (*weighted manifesto score*) has actually outpaced actual government spending on defense in Western democracies as a share of GDP.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to international partnership, where Western governments have overreached (exceeded what their voting publics support), the reverse is true when it comes to investing in military power. Today, Western electorates would appear to be more willing to invest in military power than their political leaders.

The patterns revealed in Figures 5 and 6 are suggestive. To assess how systematic the relationship between mainstream party strength and liberal internationalism is, we also ran a series of regression analyses. Specifically, we regressed *government policy support* for both military power and international partnership on *mainstream vote share* and *weighted manifesto score*. To reduce endogeneity and delays in outcomes, we lagged the explanatory variables (*mainstream vote share* and *weighted manifesto score*); lagging up to six years does not change the results. In addition to adding controls for past globalization flows and military expenditures into the model, all of the regression model estimates include full country fixed effects to control for country features and party system types that might conceivably influence government policy. We also include decade-period fixed effects to control for the impact of system-wide economic or geopolitical events and trends on policy.<sup>20</sup>

The full results of these tests are detailed in the Appendix (Appendix Table A2), but the key findings are summarized in Figure 7. The left-side panels display the results for Western *government policy support* for international partnership; the right-sided panels summarize the results for Western *government policy support* for military power. The upper panels describe the results for *mainstream party vote*, while the lower panels describe the results for *weighted manifesto score*. Each panel displays the counterfactual predicted levels

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, in absolute terms military spending has increased in most Western democracies, even adjusting for inflation.

<sup>20</sup> The results are very similar for all 47 year-dummies.

of *government policy support* for partnership and for power. These predicted levels are estimated using the full sample variation for *mainstream vote share* and *weighted manifesto score*, holding all other parameters and controls in the regression models at their sample medians or means.

[Figure 7 about here]

The results are broadly in line with our expectations and the empirical patterns evident in Figures 5 and 6 (and in Appendix Figure A3). The correlation between *mainstream vote share* and our two policy measures – *government policy support* for partnership and *government policy support* for military power – is positive and statistically significant. In the case of Western government support for partnership (upper-left panel), the full sample variation in electoral support for mainstream parties predicts an increase in *government policy support* from roughly 4.99 to 5.12, which amounts to more than 25 percent of the sample distribution of *government policy support* (from the 26<sup>th</sup> to the 55<sup>th</sup> percentile of the sample distribution). The results for Western *government policy support* for military power are more modest, but also statistically significant. The full distribution of *mainstream vote share* predicts increases in subsequent actual military spending that range from the 39<sup>th</sup> to the 55<sup>th</sup> percentile in the sample distribution of *government policy support* for military power (here in logged percentages of GDP).

The bottom half of Figure 7 displays the effects of voter support for party manifestos advocating liberal internationalism on Western government policy. Here we see plainly how dependent Western governments' support of international partnership has been on public support. Increased voter support for party manifestos (*weighted manifesto score*) advocating greater international openness and institutionalized cooperation results in significantly greater *government policy support* for international partnership. The full range of our *weighted manifesto score* predicts increases in nearly 70 percent of the sample distribution of *government policy support* for international partnership, ranging from the 26<sup>th</sup> to the 92<sup>nd</sup> percentile. By contrast, voter support for party manifestos advocating greater investment in military power has no discernible effect at the level of government policy. The impact of the *weighted manifesto score* on *government support* for greater military power is statistically insignificant.

The inferential analysis summarized in Figure 7 offers strong support for our argument. The West's commitment to liberal internationalism rested on a political foundation that has fractured. Political parties that have been liberal internationalism's staunchest backers have weakened as has voter support for liberal internationalist platforms and agendas. To be sure, there is considerable variation across the West, and we see that domestic politics is less decisive in explaining variation in Western investment in military power. However, the overall pattern is clear, as is the implication: as the political center goes, so goes liberal internationalism.<sup>21</sup> Given how much political altitude mainstream parties have lost in recent years (Figures 5 and 6), Western political leaders are likely to come under increasingly pressure to roll back commitments to the liberal international order that were once taken for granted.

### Conclusion

Why has Western support for liberal internationalism weakened? What explains Western democracies' retreat from the liberal international order? There is no shortage of answers. International relations scholars and foreign policy analysts have emphasized the West's misguided and costly efforts to promote democracy (e.g. the Iraq War) (Lind and Wohlforth, 2019; Mearsheimer, 2018; Walt, 2019), the massive shift of wealth from West to East over the past quarter of a century (Layne, 2018; Quah and Mahbubani, 2016), and rising inequality in Western societies (Colgan and Keohane, 2017; Ikenberry 2018; Norloff, 2018; Snyder, 2019), among other international developments and trends. In this paper, we have advanced an explanation that does not necessarily conflict with any of these, but that may indeed identify a domestic mechanism that links them all, and that also offers an explanation for variation in Western countries' foreign policy trajectories across both time and policy arenas. This explanation links the decline in Western governments' support of liberal internationalism to the steady decline of mainstream political parties.

For decades, mainstream political parties were the bedrock of the Western liberal international order. As the vital center, they were not only a bulwark against political extremism from the political left and political right as Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Reinhold Niebuhr, and other political analysts argued. Mainstream parties were also the building blocks

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<sup>21</sup> These patterns hold up across a range of approaches to estimating the effects of party and electoral politics on Western government support for liberal internationalism. For instance, combining *mainstream vote share* and *weighted manifesto score* produces similar effects on *government policy support* (despite substantial resulting collinearity). The results also do not vary much when we break our sample into smaller time periods – e.g., before and after the end of the Cold War– and should we add other substantive controls. Similarly, standardizing and combining our measures of power and partnership into one composite indicator correlates significantly and positively with lagged *mainstream party vote*.

upon which the West's shared commitment to liberal internationalism rested. During the Cold War American and European elites and their publics supported foreign policies that relied on both military power and international institutions to promote and defend Western interests. Across the West, political leaders could advance liberal internationalist policies such as free trade, open immigration, and collective security safe in the knowledge that a broad cross-section of political parties representing the vast majority of the electorate would support these policies. As we have shown here, Western political leaders can no longer assume such levels of domestic support. The center has not held.

For over two decades, political parties carrying the liberal internationalist banner have lost ground in national electoral arenas and legislatures to radical-right and radical-left parties challenging this foreign policy agenda. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this process did not begin in 2016 with election of Donald Trump to the American presidency and the British vote to leave the European Union. It is traceable as far back as the late 1980s and the early 1990s. This is when the first fissures in liberal internationalism's domestic political foundations appeared. Those fissures widened still further in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis. In short, as mainstream parties have grown progressively weaker electorally over the past quarter of a century, so have the domestic institutional structures that have long supported the Western liberal international order. This has made it easier for liberal internationalism's foes to attack it and more difficult for liberal internationalism's defenders to support it.

One important takeaway from our analysis is that Western democracies are suffering from a shortage of institutional capacity. The many foreign policy commitments Western governments have made in the name of liberal internationalism are now out of alignment with what their political parties are willing to support. It remains to be seen whether this hollowing out of the political center will push the West's fading commitment to the liberal international order past a crucial "tipping point." Yet one clear inference from our analysis is that trying to revive the Western domestic consensus in favor of liberal internationalism solely by narrowing international commitments or by shedding them will not be enough. In the absence of a sustained commitment to address the domestic as well as international conditions that have weakened mainstream parties, liberal internationalism's institutional foundations in Western democracies will continue to contract.

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Figure 1: Structure of Western debate over international order

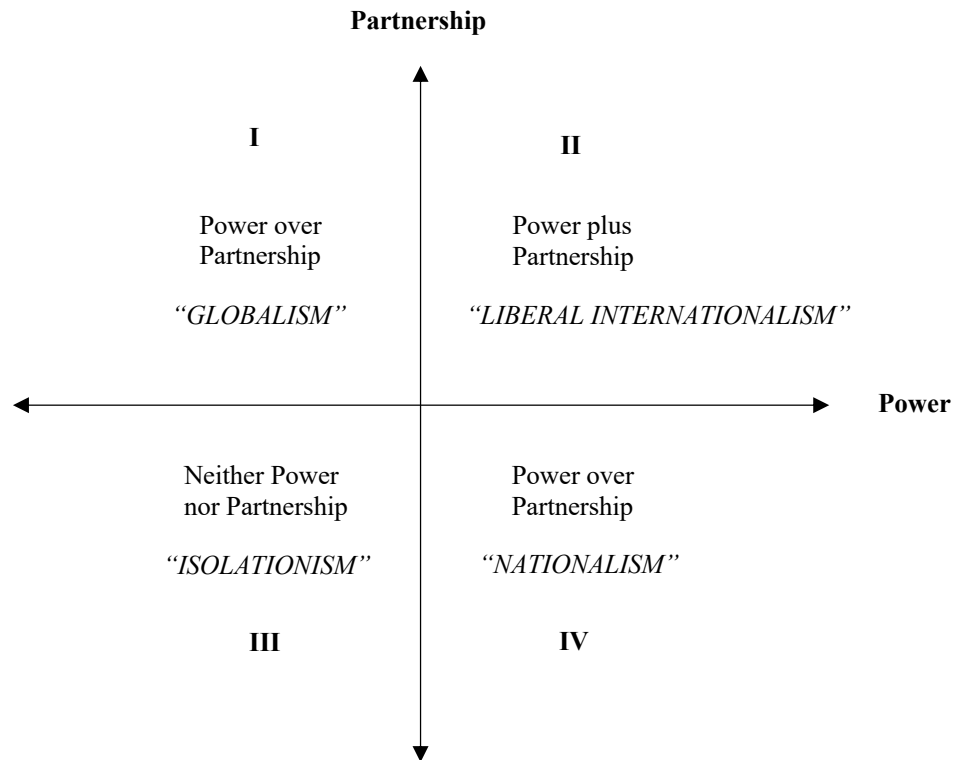


Figure 2: Western mean support for international partnership and military power, 1970-2016

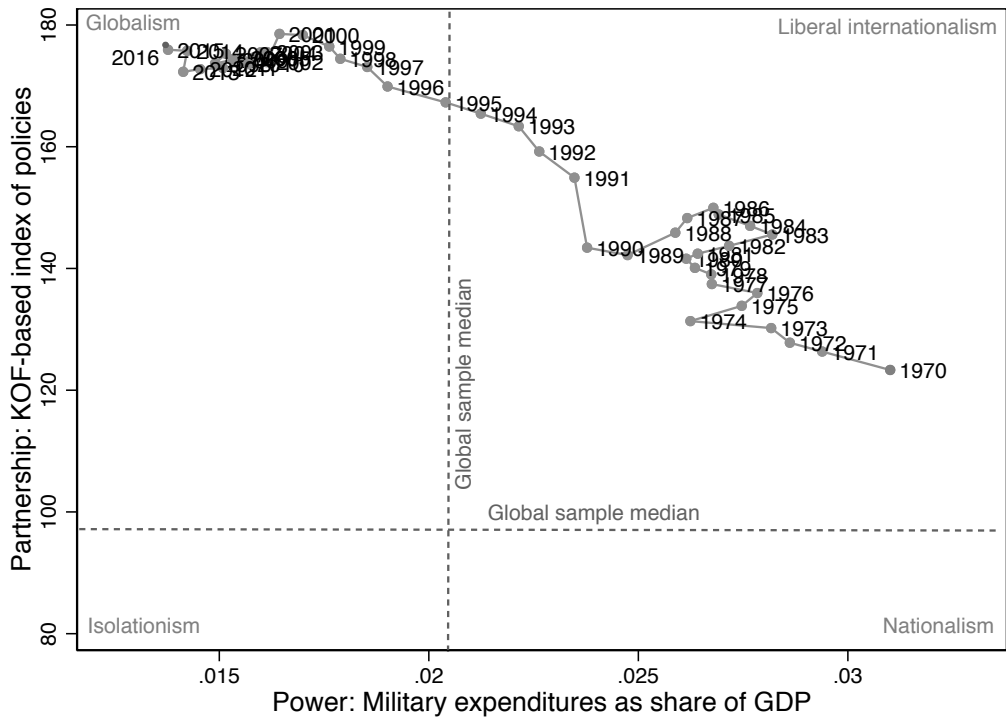


Figure 3: Western support for international partnership and military power by major power, 1970-2016

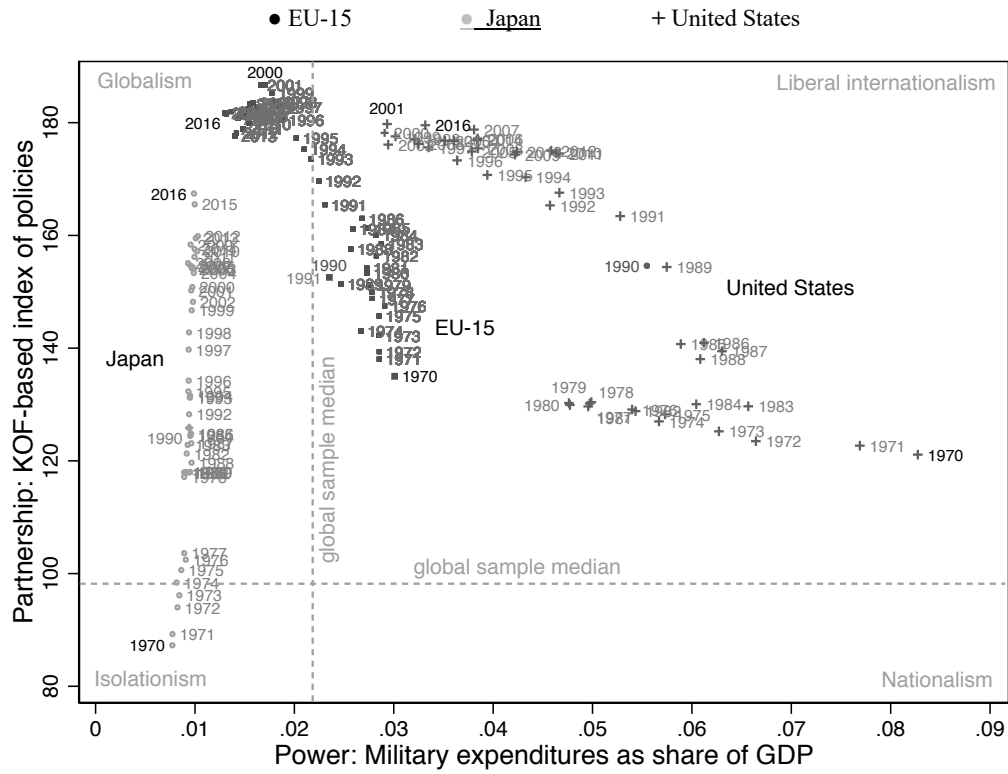


Figure 4: Party platform support for international partnership and military power by party family, 1970-2017

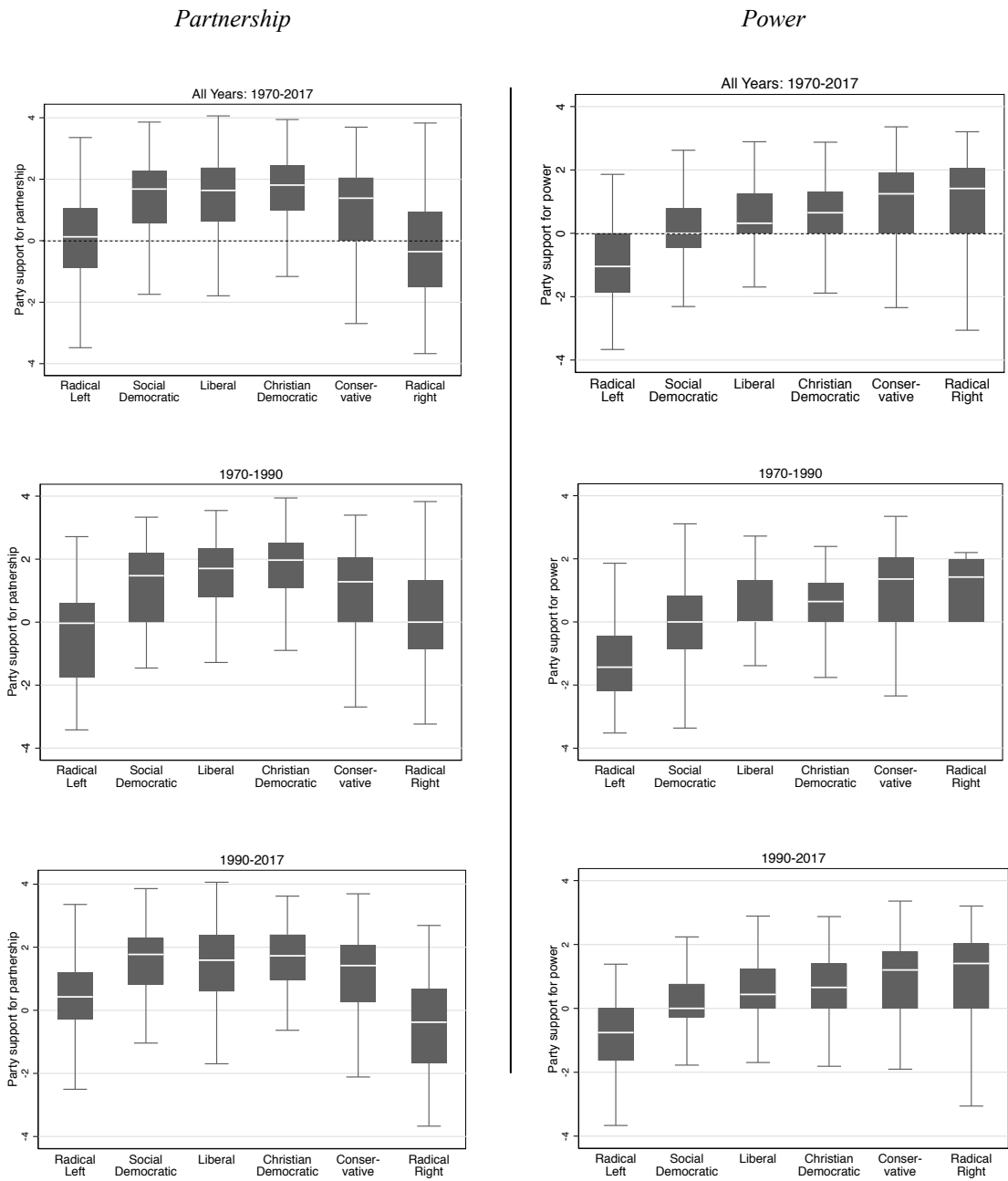


Figure 5: Domestic support for international partnership in Western democracies, 1970-2017

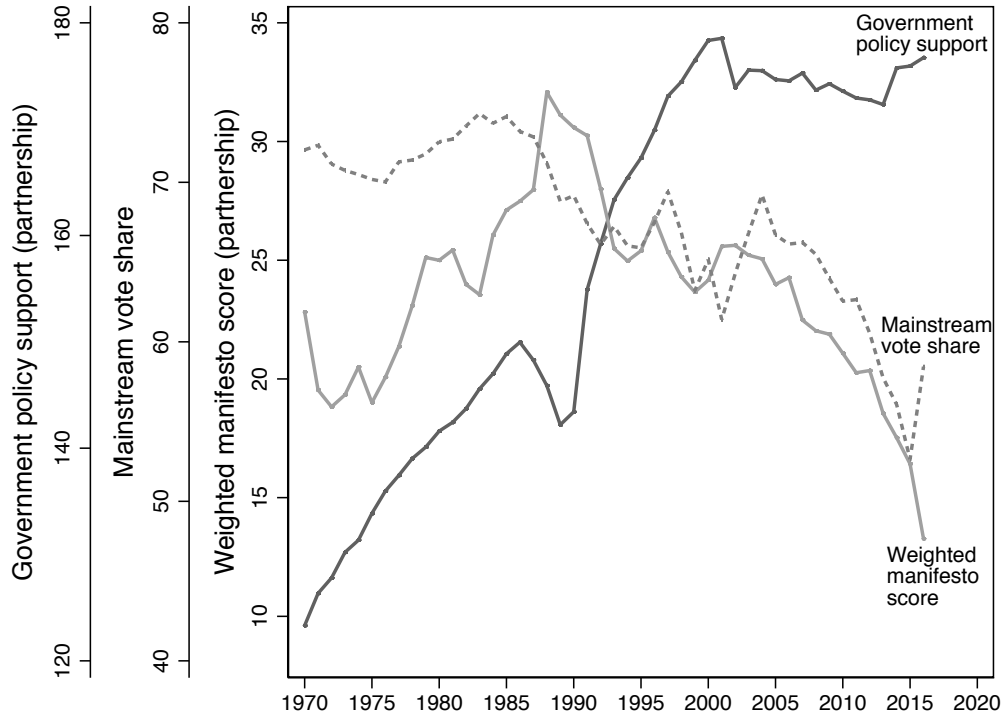


Figure 6: Domestic support for military power in Western democracies, 1970-2017

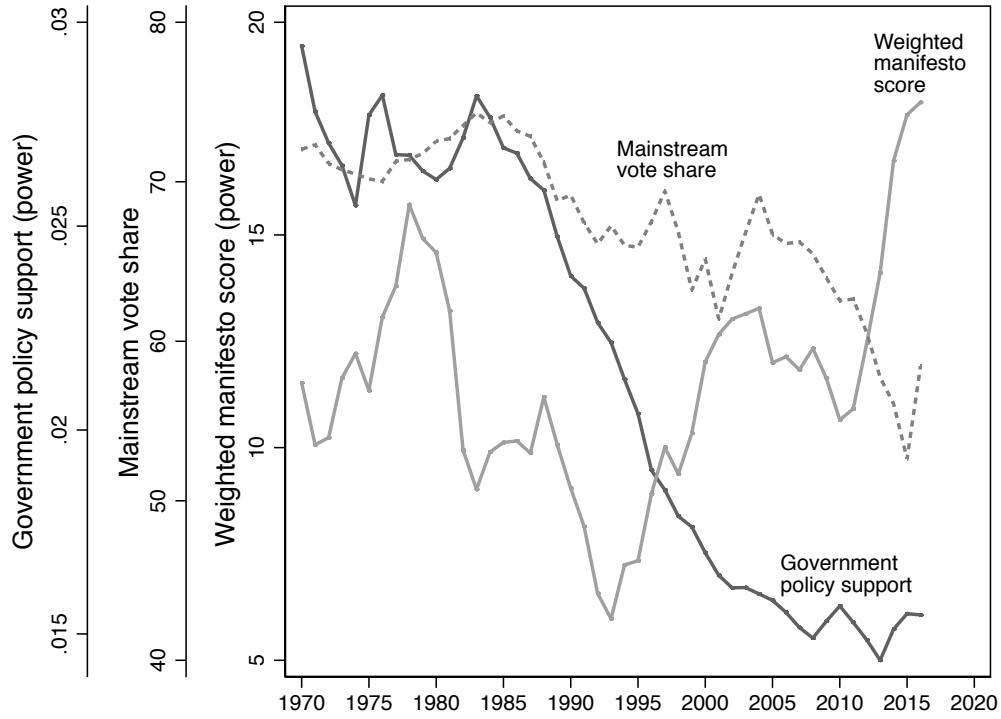
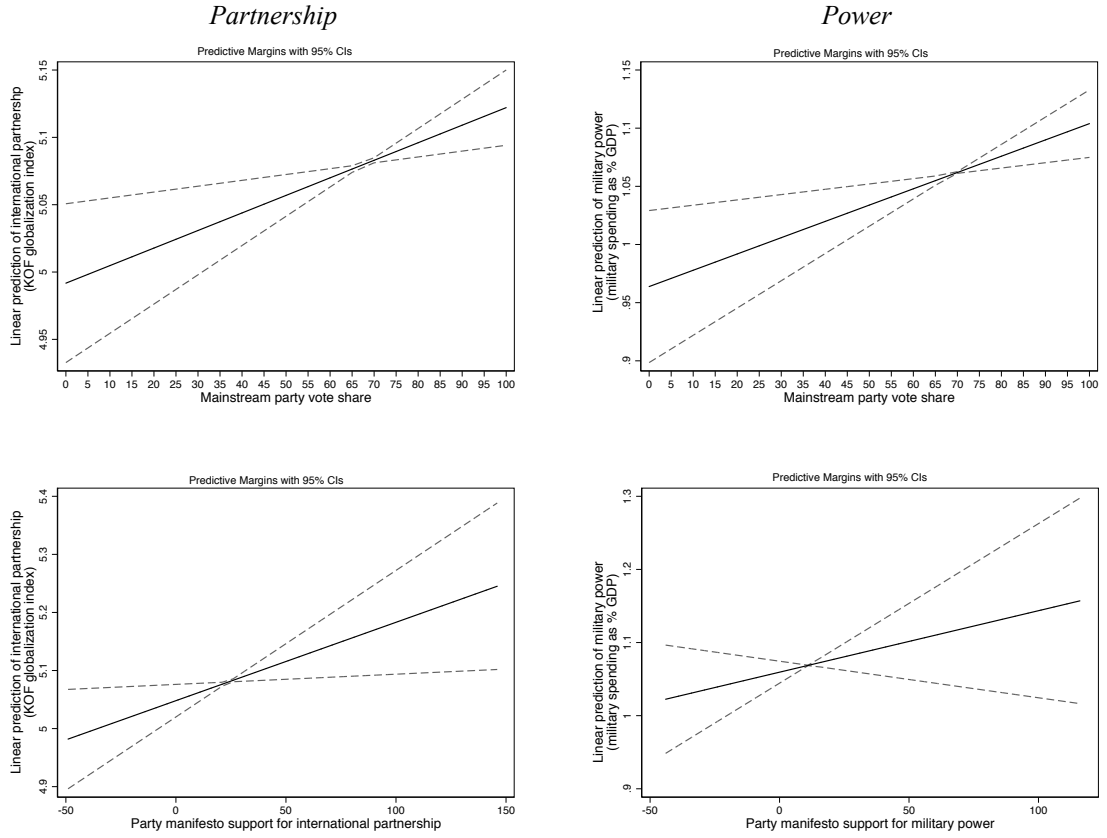




Figure 7: Predicted *international partnership* and *military power* by mainstream party vote and weighted party platform support



## Appendix

Table A1: Party platforms supporting international partnership and military power by party type

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
	Support Net Partnership				Support Net Power	
Radical Left	-0.792*** (0.168)	-1.129*** (0.262)	-0.512** (0.174)	-0.745*** (0.168)	-0.895** (0.328)	-0.632*** (0.172)
Social Democratic	0.455** (0.166)	0.398* (0.158)	0.637** (0.195)	0.287 (0.160)	0.323 (0.342)	0.316* (0.154)
Liberal	0.413* (0.170)	0.355 (0.221)	0.501** (0.181)	0.808*** (0.146)	0.908** (0.327)	0.761*** (0.152)
Christian Democratic	0.528*** (0.146)	0.565* (0.225)	0.546** (0.188)	0.851*** (0.200)	0.992* (0.444)	0.809*** (0.171)
Conservative	0.253 (0.218)	0.368 (0.254)	0.355 (0.257)	1.206*** (0.175)	1.471*** (0.353)	1.157*** (0.176)
Radical Right	-1.441*** (0.259)	-0.754* (0.331)	-1.488*** (0.293)	1.242*** (0.210)	1.521*** (0.325)	1.230*** (0.222)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Decade dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.444*** (0.111)	1.644*** (0.120)	1.424*** (0.121)	-0.288** (0.098)	-0.241 (0.235)	-0.308** (0.094)
R-squared	0.32	0.43	0.31	0.39	0.43	0.42
N	2042	737	1305	2042	737	1305

M1-M3: Dependent variable is party-country-year party platform support for international partnership.

M4-M6: Dependent variable is party-country-year party platform support for military power.

(See text for detailed description of measures).

Models M1-M6 are fixed effects with OLS coefficients and robust-cluster standard errors (clustered by country). Country and time dummies not shown.

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, p<0.001\*\*\*

Table A2: Predicted *international partnership* and *military power* by *weighted manifesto score* and *mainstream vote share*

	M7	M8 Support Net Partnership	M9	M10	M11 Support Net Power	M12
Mainstream vote share	0.001** (0.0004)			0.001+ (0.00058)		
Radical Right vote share	-0.001 (0.0018)			0.0007 (0.0018)		
Radical Left vote share	-0.0024 (0.002)			-0.0034* (0.0014)		
Mainstream minus Radical vote share		0.0013** (0.00045)			0.001** (0.000)	
Party platform towards Partnership (vote-weighted)			0.001* (0.0005)			
Party platform towards Power (vote-weighted)						0.001 (0.001)
Globalization flows (t-5)	0.005* (0.002)	0.005* (0.002)	0.005** (0.002)			
Military spend. (t-5)				0.471*** (0.104)	0.483*** (0.104)	0.509*** (0.103)
Average vote share	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	0.004+ (0.002)	0.004+ (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Decade fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	4.595*** (0.137)	4.573*** (0.129)	4.644*** (0.111)	0.513** (0.161)	0.475** (0.135)	0.519*** (0.132)
R-squared	0.731	0.730	0.718	0.806	0.804	0.804
N	1036	1040	1067	854	854	865

M7-M9: Dependent variable is country-year government support for international partnership.

M10-M12: Dependent variable is country-year government support for military power. (See text for detailed description of measures).

Models M7-M12 are fixed effects with OLS coefficients and robust-cluster standard errors (clustered by country). Country and time dummies not shown.

+<0.10, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, p<0.001\*\*\*

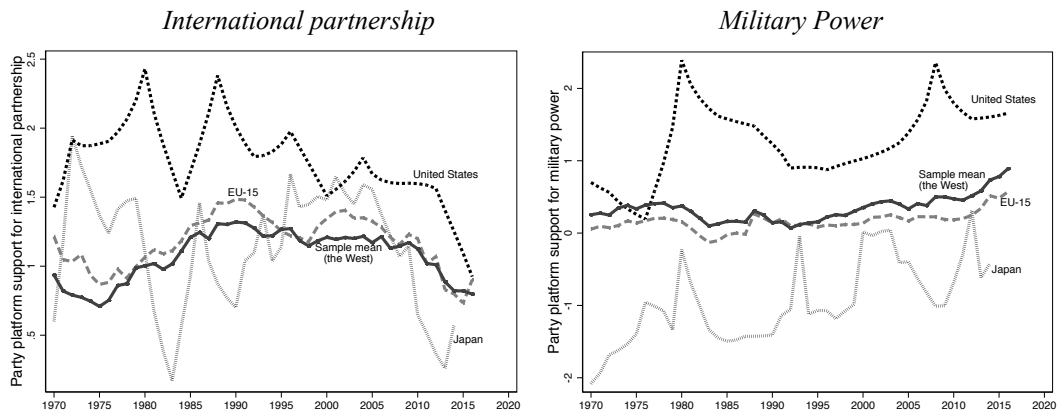
Appendix Figure A1: Trends in *partnership* and *power* in selected party systems

Figure A2: Party platform support for international partnership and military power by party type and year, 1970-2017

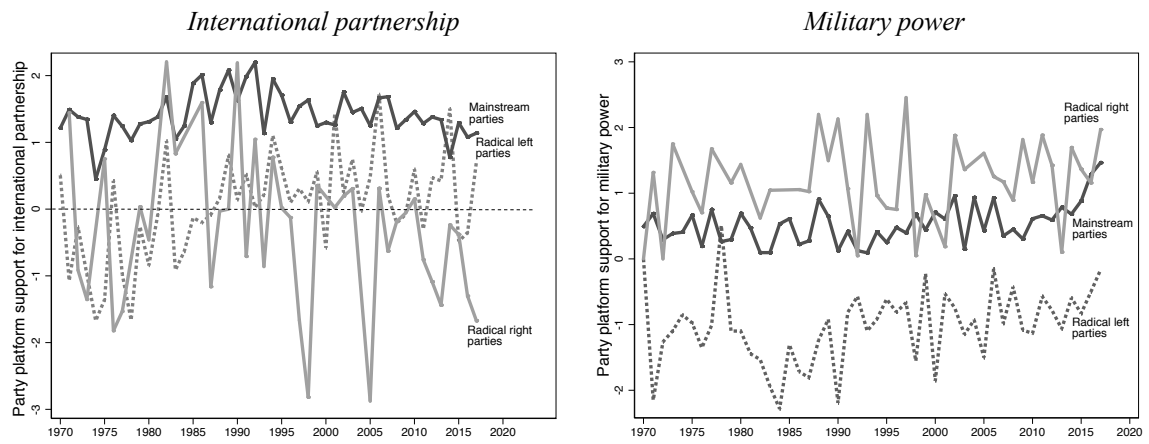


Figure A3: *Partnership and Power in Policies and Platforms, and Mainstream-versus-Radical Party Vote Shares, 1970-2017*

