

Riding the populist wave: Europe's mainstream right in crisis

*Mainstream right parties play a crucial role in the politics of all West European countries, yet they receive a fraction of the academic attention dedicated to parties on the left or far right. Drawing on a new book, **Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser** explain how Europe's mainstream right has become squeezed by a 'silent revolution' through which postmaterialist, liberal and cosmopolitan values have gained prominence, and a 'silent counter-revolution' driven by populist and nativist responses to these values.*

Europe's mainstream right parties have never been that sexy. Just think about how many books and articles, academic and otherwise, you've come across on Christian democrats, conservatives or liberals compared to the number you've read on socialists and social democrats. No contest is there?

Redressing the balance is one of the reasons we decided to put together a project, involving contributors specialising in West European politics – a project that's now come to fruition in our recently published collection, [Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis](#).

Why is it that the mainstream right has never attracted as much attention as its rivals? It might have something to do with the fact that most people who write about politics, as opposed to actually practicing it, are on the left themselves. Or it might not. But, the more you think about it, the stranger it is. After all, mainstream right parties have played, and continue to play, a crucial role in governing most European countries.

Of course, it's not as if the right of the political spectrum doesn't get any attention at all. It's just that most of it these days seems to go to the far right, whether we're talking about the extreme right or, more commonly, the populist radical right that shares some of its more nativist and authoritarian tendencies but operates (for the most part anyway) within the parameters set by democracy and the rule of law. Indeed, it's the populist radical right that's often held partly responsible for the problem the left seems to be having in holding on to the less well-heeled and less well-educated part of its traditional electoral coalition.

How much that's actually true, of course, is the subject of impassioned scholarly and 'real-world' debate. But that debate, important though it is, risks blinding us to the fact that the mainstream right in many European countries is also struggling to come to terms with ongoing socio-economic and cultural changes and their political consequences. The electoral decline they too have suffered may be more gradual and possibly less steep – another reason perhaps for the relative lack of attention paid to the parties concerned – but it is arguably no less significant.

Indeed, some would even say more so, since without a thriving centre-right – one capable, moreover, of generating ideas and policies of its own rather than simply reacting to and adopting those of its more radical rivals – there is a risk that some of the forces and elites that eventually reconciled themselves to democracy in the twentieth century may be tempted to turn away from it in the twenty-first. In fact, as our book shows, this is one of the main dangers for Western European democracy in the 21st century.

Characterising and encapsulating the changes and the challenges faced by mainstream parties is no easy task. Any attempt to do so will inevitably involve some kind of shorthand. Of all the frames on offer, the one that most helpfully reduces but also communicates the complexity is Ronald Inglehart's notion of the [silent revolution](#) – a generational shift toward post-material, progressive and liberal values, which in turn produced a backlash (often but not exclusively centring on antipathy towards migration and multiculturalism) labelled the [silent counter-revolution](#) by Piero Ignazi.

Both the silent revolution and the silent counter-revolution potentially pose problems for mainstream right parties, although both the extent and the scope of those problems is likely to vary according to which of the three party families they belong to.

One would expect, for example, Christian democratic parties to find the liberal, progressive, and in many cases individualistic values of the silent revolution rather more difficult to adapt to than liberal parties. On the other hand, one would guess that liberal parties would find the anti-immigration politics of the silent counter-revolution no less awkward than their Christian democratic counterparts. And although conservative parties, many of them accustomed to flirting with (or even advocating) nationalism, authoritarianism and nativism might have it easier in some respects, the silent counter-revolution isn't necessarily plain sailing for them either: how much, for instance, can a conservative party badmouth immigration and take steps to restrict it before the business interests it represents (and is perhaps partially funded by) begin to push back?

Of course, immigration, while it may often be the most controversial, isn't the only issue impacted by the silent revolution and the silent counter-revolution. Moral/social issues, perhaps revolving around sexual and gender emancipation or crime and punishment, are affected too. So is the debate not just about the scope of the welfare state but who it is most designed to help (or even to hinder). European integration also presents a challenge: depending on which country and which party (and party family we're talking about) some of the four freedoms are easier to champion (or cope with) than others.

To see how the mainstream right has managed (or not managed very well) in Austria, in France, in Germany, in Italy, in the Netherlands, in Spain, in Sweden, and in the UK, you'll need to dip into the country case studies contained within the book, and perhaps keep an eye on this site for the take-homes, too! But we were also lucky enough to be able to include an expert look at the demand side and the supply side changes on the mainstream right, both of which throw up some fascinating facts.

If you're familiar with the UK, for example, and had assumed that other European parties have been managing, like the British Conservatives, to significantly increase their working-class vote, you'd be wrong; in reality, there's not been a great deal of change in the social composition of the electorate mainstream right parties tend to appeal to. And on parties' positions (for example, on the four issues we focus on) there haven't necessarily been huge shifts either, with a couple of exceptions, the less significant one being on moral/social issues, the stand-out one being the adoption of substantially more restrictive stances on immigration, although whether that has come about as a response to the far right or to the electorate is always going to be difficult to disentangle.

In the end, the mainstream right is struggling – more successfully in some places than in others – to balance maintaining its appeal, on the one hand, to better-off, better-educated voters who seem more and more comfortable with the silent revolution and, on the other, to less well-off and well-educated voters tempted by the hard-line rhetoric of a far right which is a product of the silent counter-revolution.

Right now, and perhaps predictably, it seems as if it is Europe's dwindling Christian democratic parties who are finding this balance hardest to achieve – something that may explain the difficulties currently faced by the CDU-CSU in Germany. Liberal parties, on the other hand, are generally coping rather better, while the fate of conservative parties varies.

Certainly in the UK (which may have left the EU but is still part of Europe!), riding rather than resisting the populist wave seems to have worked for Boris Johnson's Tories. But how far you can go before you end up effectively turning into the threat you once faced – and in so doing beginning to resemble the illiberal democrats currently in charge in Poland and Hungary – remains a live (and for democracy a crucial) question.

For more information, see the authors' new edited volume, [Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Dirk Vorderstraße \(CC BY-NC 2.0\)](#)
