



PROJECT MUSE®

## The Cost of Convergence

Sheri Berman, Hans Kundnani

Journal of Democracy, Volume 32, Number 1, January 2021, pp. 22-36  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0013>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/778230>

# Mainstream Parties in Crisis

## THE COST OF CONVERGENCE

*Sheri Berman and Hans Kundnani*

*Sheri Berman* is professor of political science at Barnard College, Columbia University. *Hans Kundnani* is senior research fellow in the Europe Programme at Chatham House.

Understanding why democracy is floundering and populism is flourishing is the most important challenge facing students and supporters of democracy today. Many analyses of democratic backsliding and populism focus on polarization. In an influential *Journal of Democracy* article, for example, Milan Svobik argued that as polarization increases, “a significant fraction of voters may be willing to sacrifice democratic principles in favor of electing a candidate who champions their party or interests. In a sharply polarized electorate, even pro-democratically minded voters may act as partisans first and democrats only second.” Similarly, in their bestseller *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt conclude: “If one thing is clear from studying breakdowns throughout history, it’s that extreme polarization can kill democracies.”<sup>1</sup>

The United States is the clearest and most consequential example of the pathologies of polarization. Over the past decades the Republican and Democratic parties have grown further apart than at perhaps any time since the Civil War and extreme partisanship has become entrenched within the Republican and Democratic electorates. This has increased animosity and negative stereotyping among citizens, caused politicians and voters to make political decisions based on anger and emotion, and led partisans to view their opponents as threats rather than simply people they differ from politically, making them more willing to accept illiberal or even antidemocratic moves by populists against them and diminishing the resilience of democracy overall.

Yet even as observers of the U.S. and other cases were stressing how polarization can weaken democracy and contribute to the rise of right-wing populism, many observers of Europe were noticing different

trends. Many European democracies have also, of course, experienced democratic decay and growing right-wing populism, but not against the backdrop of U.S.-style party polarization and deepening partisanship. Indeed, the backstory to democratic decay and populism in Europe is in many ways the mirror image of the U.S. case: During the late twentieth century, European parties were *converging* ideologically and partisanship was diminishing.

After 1945, parties of the center-left and center-right predominated in Western Europe. These parties had fairly clear political profiles and identities as well as reliable partisans and voters. In the twentieth century's waning years, mainstream center-left and center-right parties in many European countries began to converge to the point where they no longer offered voters clear alternatives on many of the most pressing issues of the day.

This occurred most clearly and consequentially in the newly reunited Germany. The main center-left party, the Social Democrats (SPD), and the main center-right formation, the Christian Democrats (CDU) together with their Bavarian sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU), each moved to the center. The SPD moved right on economics while the CDU/CSU shifted left on cultural issues. The meeting in the middle was so complete that they melded into a "grand coalition" that has governed the country since 2005, except for a four-year period after the 2009 election. This convergence shifted the CDU, the CSU, and the SPD away from the preferences of many of their own voters, leaving a significant pool of German citizens feeling dissatisfied and unrepresented. Many such voters eventually shifted their support to a far-right party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), that came into being in April 2013 to contest the federal election held in September of that year.

Unlike many scholars who emphasize polarization *or* convergence, we argue that *both* can threaten democracy. Whether either does so will depend on the nature of the polarization or convergence that is taking place, and the context in which it is occurring. Polarization over economic issues, of the kind that Western Europe saw after 1945, is less problematic for democracy than the political polarization over cultural matters that exists in the United States today. But whether convergence is problematic also depends on the structure of voter preferences and the salience of key issues. When existing parties have profiles that match the preferences of the electorate and voters are relatively satisfied with the status quo, convergence may be relatively unproblematic. If, however, parties move away from the preferences of their voters on certain issues and the salience of these same issues increases, then so will voter dissatisfaction and alienation. This is the context in which new parties, particularly extremist ones, can thrive.

This is what has happened in many European countries since the end of the last century. Center-left parties moved to the center on economic

issues while some center-right parties moderated their positions on traditional values, immigration, and other concerns related to national identity. A gap developed between voters' preferences and what the traditional parties were offering. Old partisan allegiances lost their hold on voters; not a few drifted into apathy. Seeing an opportunity, right-wing populist parties reshaped their profiles to better meet disaffected voters' preferences. Such parties began picking up votes and did especially well when issues such as immigration and national identity came to the fore, highlighting the contrast between populists and traditional parties.

### **Strong and Stable Parties: Postwar Western Europe**

During the decades after World War II, West European party systems were dominated by center-left (social-democratic, socialist, or labor) parties such as the SPD and center-right (Christian-democratic or conservative) parties such as the CDU and the CSU. These parties mainly competed on economic issues: Parties on the left favored a more activist state, higher social spending, and the public provision of key goods such as education and healthcare. Parties on the right argued for a smaller state and a greater role for families as well as religious and private charitable organizations in social provision.

Whether left or right of center, these parties were strong, mass organizations with extensive ties to civil society associations and interest groups (most notably unions for the left and business organizations on the right). These bonds helped to mobilize voters at election time, and maintained their loyalty between elections. Partisanship was high, or in scholarly language, voters were "strongly aligned" with their respective parties. Indeed, it was not uncommon, particularly on the left, for party membership to be viewed as part of one's personal identity—as is the case in polarized politics today.

The combination of relatively clear party profiles, strong party organizations, and high levels of political membership and partisanship made postwar West European party systems and voting patterns quite stable: The established, mainstream parties consistently garnered the votes of the vast majority of voters. Electoral volatility—the incidence of party-switching by voters from one election to the next—was comparatively low. As one representative study of the postwar decades noted, "the electoral strength of most parties . . . since the war has changed very little from election to election."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, European party systems and the voting patterns of various groups were so stable that in 1967, Stein Rokkan and Seymour Martin Lipset famously called them "frozen."<sup>23</sup>

At the end of the 1970s, however, party systems and voting patterns began to "unfreeze" as partisanship declined and electoral volatility increased. The strong, mass parties of the postwar era began transforming into what Richard Katz and Peter Mair have termed "cartel parties" that

were focused more on capturing state resources and maintaining political power than on mobilizing and maintaining the loyalty of voters. This shift was reflected in parties' weakening ties to civil society organizations, increasingly technocratic leadership cadres, and, most strikingly, declining party membership. As one study put it, by the end of the twentieth century there was "scarcely any other indicator relating to mass politics in Europe that reveals such a strong and consistent trend as that which we see with respect to the decline of party membership."<sup>4</sup>

Accompanying these organizational shifts were programmatic and relational ones. During the last years of the twentieth century, the policy profiles and appeals of the respective mainstream center-left and center-right parties became fuzzier and less distinctive. In Europe, convergence during the late twentieth century was driven primarily by an almost universal trend by mainstream parties of the left shifting to the center on economic issues and diluting or even ditching the identity- or class-based appeals that had characterized them during the postwar decades—another interesting contrast to the U.S. case, where polarization was driven primarily by a shift to the right by the mainstream party of the right, the Republicans.

During the postwar period, West European center-left parties were associated with the view that it was the job of democratic governments to protect citizens from capitalism's negative consequences. Concretely, as noted above, this meant championing an activist state and high public spending. In addition, although postwar center-left parties tried to capture votes outside the working class, their appeals nonetheless centered on representing the economic interests of workers and others vulnerable to the vicissitudes of capitalism. The identities of center-left parties remained, in other words, significantly class-based even if they now claimed to represent the working classes rather than a single working class.

This changed during the late twentieth century. Center-left parties began moving to the center economically. Facing the declining efficacy of many postwar policies, urged on by international organizations and economists (even those affiliated with the left), and lacking any distinctive alternatives of their own, center-left parties accepted deregulation, welfare-state cutbacks, and globalization. This was true across Western Europe: Even avatars of social democracy such as Scandinavia's center-left parties accepted policies, such as partial privatization of the welfare state, that would have been unthinkable in decades prior. Convergence on economic issues was furthered by the evolution of the European Union, which increasingly constrained the policy alternatives that national parties could offer voters, thereby "arguably undermin[ing] one of the primary functions of the domestic electoral process—namely to offer voters a broad range of policy alternatives."<sup>5</sup> This shift to the center by mainstream center-left parties moved them away from voters with

left-wing economic preferences, a category in which workers and other citizens with low levels of income and education were overrepresented.

By the late 1990s, as one study put it, “Social Democracy . . . had more in common with its main competitors than with its own positions roughly three decades earlier.”<sup>6</sup> As they watered down their economic-policy stands, center-left parties also began deemphasizing class. Increasingly, their leaders came not from blue-collar ranks, but from a highly educated elite. By the late twentieth century, social-democratic parties were no longer clearly working-class parties but rather represented, as Thomas Piketty recently put it, “the Brahmin left.”<sup>7</sup>

A much-discussed example of this shift was the British Labour Party. Under the leadership of Tony Blair, it adopted a technocratic, centrist economic profile. (When asked to name her greatest achievement, Margaret Thatcher is said to have replied “Tony Blair.”) Labour’s 1997 election manifesto reflected this “radical” centrism, declaring:

We aim to put behind us the bitter political struggles of left and right that have torn our country apart for too many decades. Many of these conflicts have no relevance whatsoever to the modern world—public versus private, bosses versus workers, middle class versus working class. It is time for this country to move on and move forward.<sup>8</sup>

To go with its new profile on economic issues, Labour shifted its appeal and rhetoric. Whereas it had once “regularly referred to the working class in both speeches and policy documents,” by century’s end “there [was] little recognition of class.” In addition, party leaders no longer came from the trade-union movement, but mostly from “a pool of highly educated, upper middle-class people.” The result was that by the late 1990s voters increasingly viewed Labour and the Conservatives as having “similar policies” and “representing similar types of (middle-class) people.”<sup>9</sup>

Although convergence during the late twentieth century was most clearly driven by mainstream parties of the left shifting to the center on economic issues and watering down or even abandoning class-based appeals, some center-right parties in Europe shifted their profiles and appeals during this time as well.

During the postwar period center-right parties had generally taken conservative stances on immigration and other cultural issues. This had been particularly the case for Christian-democratic parties, which viewed advocacy of “traditional” and religious values as crucial to their identity. In particular, they continued to understand national identity in largely cultural or even ethnic terms and were suspicious of immigration and multiculturalism. They also tended to take a conservative position on gender roles and to oppose rights for sexual minorities, which they saw as a threat to the traditional family.

Through the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, some

center-right parties moderated their positions on these issues by distancing themselves from their “Christian” identities, taking moderate or even liberal stances on immigration and national-identity issues, and so on. A striking example comes from Sweden. There, the ostensibly “conservative” party in the country’s political mainstream—the Moderate Party (or *Moderaterna*)—joined every other established party in backing the country’s extremely generous policies toward immigrants and refugees. Anyone who questioned the mainstream parties’ agreement on these policies, whether “from within the established parties, the media, or academia—was instantly tagged as reprobate or racist.” Any Swedish voter who favored tighter controls on the entry of immigrants and refugees, akin perhaps to the restrictions that existed in Norway or Denmark, “simply had no [mainstream] party to turn to.”<sup>10</sup>

### The Consequences of Convergence

Convergence between center-left and center-right parties helped to transform political competition in Western Europe.<sup>11</sup> First, the center-left’s shift to the center on economic policy gave right-wing populists an incentive to change their own economic profiles. When Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front in France, the Austrian Freedom Party, and the Danish Progress Party emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s, they supported free markets and opposed taxes and state intervention. Noticing the space left open by changes in center-left parties and voter allegiances, right-wing populist parties in the years after 2000 began criticizing globalization and embracing what is sometimes called “welfare chauvinism.” This is the idea that the main question regarding the welfare state is less its size than who gets to enjoy its benefits: not immigrants and refugees but “native-born” citizens.

Second, convergence on economic issues helped to push noneconomic ones to the fore. “Over the last decades,” as one of several studies in this vein has noted, “economic issues . . . lost salience in all [European] countries except Germany.”<sup>12</sup> This benefited right-wing populists, who are seen as having the clearest and most consistent policies on various cultural issues, particularly immigration. These issues tend, moreover, to divide center-left voters while uniting far-right voters, who are unified around cultural concerns.

Third, convergence produced center-left and center-right parties with policy offerings that no longer matched the preferences of many voters. The center-left’s shift meant that voters with left-wing economic preferences, including these parties’ traditional working-class voters, no longer had a reason to view social-democratic parties as champions of their economic interests. Once right-wing populists moderated their own economic profiles, embracing “welfare chauvinism,” protectionism, and so on, working-class and other voters with left-wing economic preferences

could easily vote for them. In Austria, France, and elsewhere, the largest working-class party is now from the populist right.

Meanwhile, the shift by some center-right parties on cultural issues moved them away from the preferences of many of their voters as well. As one recent analysis notes, whereas “elites strongly converge on cosmopolitan positions [such as open borders and supranational regulation of many issue areas] . . . mass publics are less homogeneous, but lean more strongly towards communitarian positions [such as limits on immigration and free trade and nation-state sovereignty].” This has left citizens with communitarian preferences underrepresented in “public debates” and “party politics. . . since ‘mainstream parties’” have generally shifted to cosmopolitan positions over the past years.<sup>13</sup>

The disjuncture between mainstream parties’ policies and the preferences of many voters fueled a weakening of West European voters’ loyalties—the opposite of what has happened in the United States. Around 1970, about three of every five West Europeans identified with a political party. By 2010, that share had fallen to about a third. Electoral volatility rose, as did political apathy and nonparticipation. As Peter Mair puts it, many European citizens increasingly took to “withdrawing and disengaging from the arena of conventional politics.”<sup>14</sup>

These trends—parties’ converging with each other and losing touch with their voters, the decline of partisanship, growing electoral volatility and citizen disengagement—created a pool of dissatisfied and disconnected voters. Then events weighed in. Europe has faced a number of challenges—the financial crisis of 2008, the euro crises that grew out of it starting in 2010, and the refugee crisis of 2015—that have left publics feeling more resentful of elites and mainstream parties. Discontent over neoliberal austerity policies has gathered strength, as has dissatisfaction with immigration policy and other cultural issues. This has created a context within which democratic dissatisfaction and right-wing populism can thrive.

### **Convergence in Germany: The Merkel Consensus**

Germany is an extreme and particularly consequential example of the kind of convergence that has taken place in Europe in recent decades. Especially since Angela Merkel became chancellor in 2005, the ideological differences between her CDU and its main rival, the SPD, have shrunk dramatically. Grand coalitions, once an oddity in Germany, have become almost the norm. For the last fifteen years, the world of German politics has been dominated by what we might call the “Merkel consensus.”

Before 2005, the only grand coalition in the Federal Republic’s history had been the one led by the CDU’s Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger from 1966 to 1969. The perception it created that there was no longer



an opposition in the Bundestag led to the emergence of what became known as the “Ausserparlamentarische Opposition” (extraparliamentary opposition), the left-wing protest movement that reached its high point in 1968. The far-right National Democratic Party was also successful during this period. In the 1969 election, for example, it got 4.3 percent of the vote—the highest ever for a far-right party until the AfD’s recent emergence.

A prerequisite for the grand coalitions under Merkel was the ideological convergence between the CDU and the SPD. As in much of the rest of Europe as well as in the United States with Bill Clinton’s New Democrats, the mainstream party of the left in Germany, the SPD, underwent a centrist economic-policy shift during the early 2000s. The SPD’s leader, Gerhard Schröder, headed two “red-green” governments between 1998 and 2005. Most consequentially, during his second mandate, Schröder implemented a series of structural reforms and social-policy cutbacks called Agenda 2010. The centerpiece of these reforms, which made up part of a broader drive to increase “competitiveness,” was a series of cuts in joblessness benefits.

These steps led some to leave the SPD and form a new party. This in turn eventually merged with the successor to the East German communist party to form a new democratic-socialist party known as Die Linke (The Left), which called for more regulation and redistribution and the end of the Schröder reforms. While Die Linke did not formally emerge until 2007, during the 2005 federal elections enough disaffected SPD voters rallied behind the former communist party from the old East Germany to give that party nearly 9 percent of the nationwide vote. This was enough to make a “red-green” SPD-Green government impossible. To fill the resulting vacuum, the first grand coalition of the CDU/CSU (35 percent) and the SPD (34 percent) appeared.

The SPD’s shift to the right on economic policy continued during the first Merkel government. Her finance minister was the Social Democrat Peer Steinbrück. In 2009, he oversaw the “Schuldenbremse” (a balanced-budget amendment or, literally, a “debt brake”), which set constitutional limits on deficits and debt levels. By the time the euro crisis began the following year, the Social Democrats were in opposition—the CDU/CSU was governing in conjunction with the Free Democrats (FDP)—but were unable to offer a real alternative to Merkel’s approach, which involved imposing austerity and a version of the *Schuldenbremse* on the so-called periphery of the eurozone.

The SPD returned to government in the second grand coalition under Merkel from 2013 to 2017. The party succeeded in persuading the coalition to adopt a minimum wage, but was able to do little beyond that to create a distinct SPD profile on economic matters. In the 2017 elections, the SPD’s share of the vote dropped to 20.5 percent—its lowest vote share in the history of the Federal Republic—and the party initially

decided to go into opposition. But after the collapse of talks between the Christian Democrats, the Free Democrats, and the Greens to form a “Jamaica coalition,”<sup>15</sup> the SPD agreed to join yet another grand coalition.

---

*The West European experience makes clear that under certain circumstances, convergence can be just as dangerous for democracy as polarization.*

---

When the Social Democrat Olaf Scholz took over as finance minister in 2018 and was asked whether economic policy would change on his watch, he declared: “A German finance minister is a German finance minister—party affiliation does not change that at all.”<sup>16</sup>

As the SPD had moved to the center on economic issues, the CDU had moved to the center on cultural issues such as immigration. Before Merkel, the party had opposed changing Germany’s nearly century-old immigration law, which was

based on the principle of blood citizenship and left many longtime foreign-born residents of Germany (and their children and grandchildren) without a viable path to citizenship. When this law was reformed by the “red-green” government in 1999, the CDU ran campaigns against it. In addition, in 2000, after Schröder created a scheme to allow companies such as Siemens to hire from abroad much-needed software engineers and other skilled workers, Jürgen Rüttgers ran for election as minister-president of North Rhine–Westphalia using the slogan “Kinder statt Indier” (“children instead of Indians”). Christian Democrat politicians also rejected multiculturalism and sought instead to promote the idea of a German “Leitkultur” (leading culture).

During the last decade, however, the CDU has softened its position on immigration and multiculturalism. The turning point came in 2010, when German president Christian Wulff, a Christian Democrat, declared: “Islam is part of Germany.”<sup>17</sup> Merkel supported the statement and increasingly spoke positively about Germany as an “immigration country.” Going back to the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949, center-right politicians in Germany had been acutely conscious of the danger that a far-right party could emerge. When Die Republikaner appeared in the early 1980s, for example, Franz Josef Strauss, the longtime leader of the Bavarian CSU, famously said that the CDU/CSU could not allow a political party to the right of it to establish itself. The implication was that to ensure this, the CDU/CSU needed to reach out to “national conservative” voters. But in the decade before 2015, the CDU had in effect rejected the Strauss strategy. Then the refugee crisis hit.

Merkel did not, as is often claimed, throw open Germany’s borders in 2015. But after it became clear that around a million people would be arriving in Germany that year to seek asylum, she refused to limit applications, as some on the right demanded. The sheer number of refugees

flowing into Europe and Germany dramatically raised the salience of immigration as well as fears about German culture and national identity. The AfD had been founded in 2013 to oppose German eurozone-crisis policies and especially Merkel's "bailouts" of Greece, which she had declared were *alternativlos* ("without alternative"). The refugee crisis opened a new field, and the AfD pivoted to enter it. Just as the SPD's shift to the center on economic issues had created space on its left for Die Linke to occupy, the CDU's shift to the center on cultural issues and Merkel's declaration during the 2015 refugee crisis that "Wir schaffen das" ("we can do this") created space on the right that the AfD filled.

The AfD's increased focus on immigration and related cultural issues after 2015 enabled it to capture voters who wanted an alternative to Merkel's policies and were uncomfortable with cultural change more generally. Such voters are disproportionately located in the five "new states"—that is, the former East Germany—where parties toward the extremes, whether of the right or left, do better. In 2009, its first election, Die Linke won 28.5 percent in the eastern states and only 8 percent in the ten western states. In 2017, Die Linke saw its support collapse as many former far-left voters switched to the AfD.

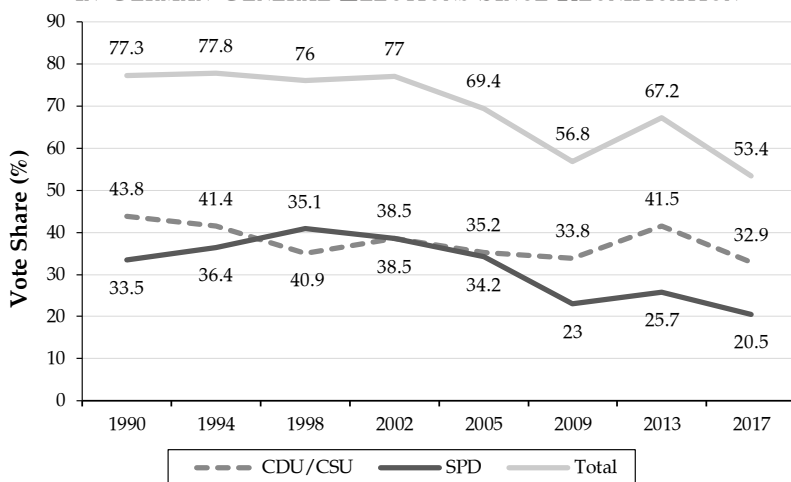
The AfD's increased eastern support helped to propel it to a nationwide vote share of 13 percent in 2017. That is by far the biggest vote share won by any far-right party in the history of the Federal Republic, and was enough to allow the AfD to enter the Bundestag for the first time; the party currently holds 89 of the body's 709 seats. The AfD's success also made yet another grand coalition between the SPD and the CDU/CSU necessary, even though the vote share of 70 percent or higher that this alliance used to command has now dipped to just a few points above 50 percent. Once the third grand coalition formed, the AfD, as the Bundestag's third-largest party, became Germany's leading opposition party.

The losses of voters that both the CDU/CSU and the SPD have suffered over their last two decades of convergence are charted in the Figure below. In the 1998 election, which offered a clear choice between a continuation of a conservative "black-yellow" (CDU/CSU-FDP) coalition and a progressive "red-green" (SPD and the Greens) coalition, the CDU and the SPD won 76 percent of the vote between them. In 2013, after two grand coalitions, their combined share began dropping, reaching just 53 percent as of 2017. Much attention has been paid to the SPD's steep fall, but the CDU has seen its share drop significantly as well.

## Polarization, Convergence, and Democratic Dysfunction

Polarization *can* be dangerous for democracy, but those focusing on it have not sufficiently recognized that the answer to whether it is a threat is: "It depends." Some forms of polarization are not problematic

**FIGURE—PERFORMANCE OF CDU/CSU AND SPD  
IN GERMAN GENERAL ELECTIONS SINCE REUNIFICATION**



*Note:* In German parliamentary elections, voters cast two votes—one to elect a member of the Bundestag to represent their constituency and another for a party. The figures in this chart are based on “second votes.”

for democracy, and indeed are likely beneficial to it. During the postwar decades, mainstream parties in Western Europe were more polarized than they are today. Partisanship was extremely high. During the last two decades, polarization between mainstream center-left and center-right parties subsided and partisanship diminished. Yet at the same time, democratic dissatisfaction spiked and right-wing populism prospered. The West European cases make clear that it is not the presence or absence of polarization as such that is key. Rather, what matters is the nature of the polarization as well as its larger political context.

In post-1945 Western Europe, center-left and center-right parties accepted capitalism but within that framework offered voters predictable alternatives on issues such as the role of the state versus that of the market, and the nature and extent of welfare programs. This kind of politicking generated polarization and partisanship, to be sure, but they were the sorts of divisions that democracy could mostly handle with ease. The questions at stake were “more or less” or “sooner or later” matters, often with a large economic dimension and subject to compromise and bargaining.<sup>18</sup> The type of polarization and partisanship that strong cultural divergences generate (as in the United States, for instance) can be more problematic for democracy. The issues in play touch deeply on questions of morality and identity and have a “binary” or “zero-sum” quality that make compromise difficult.

The West European experience also makes clear that under certain circumstances, convergence can be just as dangerous for democracy as

polarization. If mainstream parties stop offering voters clear alternatives on important issues, and the policies that these parties do offer fail to match many voters' preferences, the result is a "representation gap."<sup>19</sup> To fill it, new parties emerge, particularly when the issues that are "lost in the gap," so to speak, rise in importance to voters.

As we have seen, West European party systems of recent decades have been rife with such dynamics. Mainstream parties blurred together on economics while drifting away from the cultural preferences of a significant share of the electorate—a divergence that was particularly clear in Germany. Because the 2008 financial crisis increased discontent with austerity policies in particular and the economic status quo in general, it widened the "representation gap" that these shifts had created. When the refugee crisis came seven years later, that raised the salience of immigration and national-identity concerns. In this context, far-right populist parties, with a profile that now stressed "welfare chauvinism," the "protection" of national sovereignty, and the downsides of immigration, were able to thrive.

Recent events in the eastern German state of Thuringia highlight the implications of these dynamics as well as the challenges facing those eager to counteract populism and democratic decay today. After an election in October 2019, the far-left Die Linke emerged as the largest party in the Landtag (state parliament), followed by the AfD. Die Linke had led a "red-red-green" coalition in the state since 2014. Although's Die Linke's vote share had grown, the SPD's had declined to the point where the coalition was no longer viable. In February 2020, after other parties refused a coalition with Die Linke, the Christian Democrats backed the Free Democrat candidate Thomas Kemmerich, whom the Landtag then elected as minister-president with the help of votes from AfD lawmakers, who made up almost a quarter (22 seats) of the ninety-member body. It was the first time that mainstream parties had cooperated with a far-right party in this way.

The response—in Germany and beyond—was widespread outrage at the decision to cooperate with the far right. Writing in *Der Spiegel* and citing Levitsky and Ziblatt, Dirk Kurbjuweit called Kemmerich's election "a sign of the gradual decay of German democracy" and appealed for "complete disassociation from the AfD" as "the only appropriate course of action." Ziblatt himself wrote in the *Tagesspiegel* that "the central task for German democracy" was to take a "hard line against the radical right."<sup>20</sup> After the intervention of national leaders, including Merkel herself, the Thuringian CDU withdrew its support from Kemmerich, he resigned, and Bodo Ramelow of Die Linke became minister-president again with the support of the other parties. Thus after a brief but significant lapse, mainstream German parties reverted to their "gate-keeping" or "cordon" strategy, advocated by many scholars influenced by the polarization paradigm.

Gatekeeping alone, however, will not be enough to deal with the

threat to democracy posed by the AfD and other right-wing populist parties. Refusing to cooperate with extremists without dealing with the underlying dynamics that gave rise to them might even make the situation worse by further strengthening the perception that mainstream parties form a monolithic bloc that is unwilling or unable to respond to the concerns of a significant number of voters. In order to deal with the problems generated by convergence and the rise of right-wing populists such as the AfD, center-left and center-right parties will have to address the representation gap that provides the context within which such parties thrive. One way to do this is for the parties to diverge and offer voters real choices on the issues salient to them.

For center-left parties such as the SPD, this will mean reversing the shift since Schröder and developing an attractive and viable economic-policy profile that is clearly distinct from that offered by the center-right. This might help to reduce the salience of cultural issues and aid the party in (re)attracting voters with left-wing economic preferences. Such a shift might also put pressure on the AfD and the Greens since these parties' voters are united on cultural issues but divided in their economic preferences. Forcing these parties to take clearer stands on economic issues might drive a wedge between them and some of their voters. The SPD's new left-wing leaders, Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans, seem to want to move in this direction, but have not so far taken specific steps or withdrawn from the grand coalition. The SPD has also nominated Scholz, a centrist figure who is the embodiment of the grand coalition, as its candidate for chancellor in the federal elections that are set to take place between August and October 2021.

Along with a turn back to economics, a drop in the salience of cultural issues would be helpful. The AfD and other right-wing populist parties thrive on these issues. The pandemic has, at least temporarily, done this by diminishing the attention paid to immigration, and the AfD's popularity has dropped accordingly. Over the medium to long term, however, countering the AfD and right-wing populism more generally might also require center-right parties such as the CDU to reverse, at least to some extent, Merkel's shift on cultural issues such as immigration. The CDU, in other words, could offer voters a more clearly conservative alternative. Since the AfD's 2017 success, some leading figures in the CDU/CSU have called for such a shift. They include top contenders to replace Merkel, who in October 2018 announced that she would not run for reelection in 2021. In a sense, this would be a return to the Franz Josef Strauss strategy: Move as far to the right as is needed to close the political space that a far-right party might occupy.

As democratic dissatisfaction and populism have risen in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, many scholars have tended to focus on a single cause. But neither polarization nor convergence is *inherently* good or bad for democracy; it *depends* on their nature and the context.

When parties focus on economic issues and voters are generally satisfied with the status quo, polarization is likely to be relatively unproblematic. But if parties polarize over cultural issues, particularly in hard or fast-changing times that tempt voters to seek scapegoats or heed counsels of fear, democracy is likely to suffer.

Convergence is relatively unproblematic when voter preferences are distributed along a bell-shaped curve—as they tend to be on economic issues, particularly in Europe (whereas on cultural issues preferences have a more bimodal distribution in both the United States and Europe). If, however, mainstream parties offer little to choose from on crucial issues and fail to listen to what citizens want, then new political actors—including extremists—will find room to flourish.

## NOTES

The authors wish to dedicate this essay to the memory of Professor Wade Jacoby (1964–2020) of Brigham Young University.

1. Milan Svoblik, “Polarization versus Democracy”, *Journal of Democracy* 30 (July 2019): 20–32; Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 9.

2. Richard Rose and Derek W. Urwin, “Persistence and Change in Western Party Systems Since 1945,” *Political Studies* 18 (September 1970): 287–319.

3. Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, eds., *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

4. Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair, and Thomas Poguntke, “Going, Going...Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe,” *European Journal of Political Research* 51 (January 2011): 38. See also Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, “Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party,” *Party Politics* 1 (January 1995): 5–28; Susan E. Scarrow, “Parties Without Members?” in Russell J. Dalton and Martin P. Wattenberg, eds., *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Mark Bovens and Anchrith Wille, *Diploma Democracy: The Rise of the Political Meritocracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Stephanie L. Mudge, *Leftism Reinvented: Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

5. Kyriaki Nanou and Han Dorussen, “European Integration and Electoral Democracy: How the European Union Constrains Party Competition in the Member States,” *European Journal of Political Research* 52 (January 2013): 92. See also Hans Kundnani, “When the Rules Won’t Bend,” *The World Today*, August–September 2018, [www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/when-rules-won-t-bend](http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/when-rules-won-t-bend); and Nicole Scicluna and Stefan Auer, “From the Rule of Law to the Rule of Rules: Technocracy and the Crisis of EU Governance,” *West European Politics* 42, no. 7 (2019): 1420–42.

6. Philip Manow, Armin Schäfer, and Hendrik Zorn, “Europe’s Party-Political Centre of Gravity, 1957–2003,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 15 (January 2008): 31–32. See also Line Rennwald, *Social Democratic Parties and the Working Class: New Voting Patterns* (London: Palgrave, 2020).

7. Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2020), 869.

8. See <http://labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1997/1997-labour-manifesto.shtml>.
9. Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, *The New Politics of Class: The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 192.
10. Bo Rothstein and Sten Steinmo, "'Us Too!'—The Rise of Middle-Class Populism in Sweden and Beyond," *Social Europe*, 3 October 2018, [www.socialeurope.eu/me-too-the-rise-of-middle-class-populism-in-sweden-and-beyond](http://www.socialeurope.eu/me-too-the-rise-of-middle-class-populism-in-sweden-and-beyond). See also Ann-Catherine Jungar, "Business as Usual: Ideology and Populist Appeals of the Sweden Democrats," in Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis S. Pappas, eds., *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession* (London: ECPR Press, 2015), 46.
11. Sheri Berman and Maria Snegovaya, "Populism and the Decline of Social Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 30 (July 2019): 5–19.
12. Hanspeter Kriesi et al., "Globalization and the Transformation of the National Political Space: Six European Countries Compared," *European Journal of Political Research* 45 (October 2006): 921–56; Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: *The Silent Revolution* in Reverse," *Perspectives on Politics* 15 (June 2017): 443–54; and Christoffer Green-Pedersen, "The Growing Importance of Issue Competition: The Changing Nature of Party Competition in Western Europe," *Political Studies* 55 (October 2007): 607–28.
13. Pieter Wilde et al., eds., *The Struggle Over Borders: Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 33, 114, and 217. See also Peter Achterberg and Dick Houtman, "Why Do So Many People Vote 'Unnaturally'? A Cultural Explanation for Voting Behaviour," *European Journal of Political Research* 45 (January 2006): 75–92; Sergi Pardos-Prado, "How Can Mainstream Parties Prevent Niche Party Success? Center-Right Parties and the Immigration Issue," *Journal of Politics* 77 (April 2015): 352–67; and Timo Lochocki, *The Rise of Populism in Western Europe: A Media Analysis on Failed Political Messaging* (London: Springer, 2018).
14. Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013), 42.
15. The colors of the Jamaican national flag are black, yellow-gold, and green, which also happen to be the party colors, respectively, of the Christian Democrats, the Free Democrats, and the Greens.
16. Cerstin Gammelin and Nico Fried, "Politik ist keine Vorabendserie," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 March 2018, [www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/olaf-scholz-im-interview-politik-ist-keine-vorabendserie-1.3909193?reduced=true](http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/olaf-scholz-im-interview-politik-ist-keine-vorabendserie-1.3909193?reduced=true).
17. Christian Wulff, "Rede zum 20. Jahrestag der deutschen Einheit," [www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Christian-Wulff/Reden/2010/10/20101003\\_Rede.html](http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Christian-Wulff/Reden/2010/10/20101003_Rede.html).
18. Claus Offe, "Competitive Party Democracy and the Keynesian Welfare State: Factors of Stability and Disorganization," *Policy Sciences* 15 (April 1983): 225–46.
19. Peter A. Hall and Georgina Evans, "Representation Gaps: Changes in Popular Preferences and Party Positions over the Longer Term in the Developed Democracies," unpubl. ms.; Suzanne Berger, "Populism and the Failures of Representation," *French Politics, Culture and Society* 35 (January 2017): 21–31; and Lochocki, *Rise of Populism in Western Europe*.
20. Dirk Kurbjuweit, "The German Conservatives' Faustian Pact with the Far-Right," *Der Spiegel*, 7 February 2020, [www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-german-conservatives-faustian-pact-with-the-far-right-a-00a554e1-1089-45dd-9d77-5b6324d4c5b7](http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-german-conservatives-faustian-pact-with-the-far-right-a-00a554e1-1089-45dd-9d77-5b6324d4c5b7); Daniel Ziblatt, "Was der Tabubruch von Thüringen lehrt," *Tagesspiegel*, 16 February 2020, [www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/daniel-ziblatt-zu-afd-und-deutscher-demokratie-was-der-tabubruch-von-thueringen-lehrt/25550374.html](http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/daniel-ziblatt-zu-afd-und-deutscher-demokratie-was-der-tabubruch-von-thueringen-lehrt/25550374.html).