

# **Electoral Change, Occupational Coalitions, and the Prospects of Mainstream and Challenger Parties in Western Democracies**

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June 30, 2022

## **Abstract**

This paper documents long-term changes in the political attitudes of occupational groups, shifts in the salience of economic and cultural issues and the movements of political parties in the electoral space from 1990 to 2018 in eight western democracies. We use this evidence to evaluate prominent contentions about how electoral contestation has changed and why support for mainstream parties has declined while support for challenger parties has increased. We contribute a new analysis of how the viability of the types of electoral coalitions assembled by center-left, center-right, radical-right and Green parties changes over these decades. We argue that the viability of coalitions is affected both by changes over time in citizens' attitudes to economic and cultural issues and shifts in the relative salience of those issues, and we show how these developments have reduced support for traditional center-left and center-right coalitions and increases support for the coalitions underpinning radical right and Green parties.

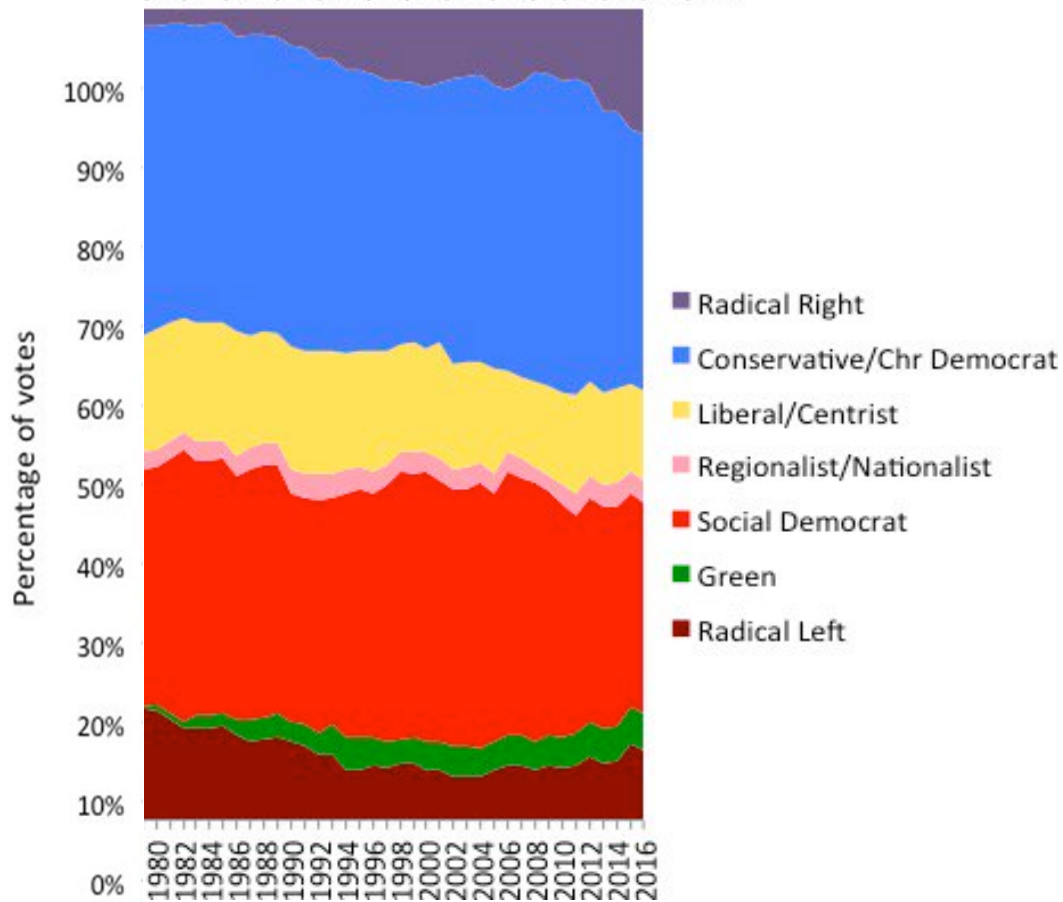
For presentation at a workshop on Cleavage Formation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

University of Zurich, July 19, 2022

The past thirty years have seen dramatic changes in the electoral politics of the western democracies. Among the most important is a substantial decline in the share of votes secured by mainstream parties of the center-left and center-right. Its mirror image has been rising electoral support for challengers, including Green parties and parties on the radical right and left (see Figure 1). A familiar postwar politics built on cleavages of social class and religion has given way to something new and consequential for the types of policies governments are likely to be able to pursue (Evans 1999; Knutsen 2006; Kriesi et al. 2008).

Scholars are still grappling with questions about whether these developments represent dealignment or realignment around new cleavages and what they imply for the long-term fortunes of mainstream parties (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019; Gidron and Ziblatt 2019). However, the answers to such questions about the future turn on an important question about the past, namely: in what ways has the electoral landscape changed and rendered the electoral situation of mainstream parties more precarious? An impressive body of scholarship addresses that question, albeit with competing contentions, and our objective is not to add to them. But most of the evidence adduced for these contentions is cross-sectional or based on data for relatively short periods of time. We lack clear portraits of how the positions of social groups within the electoral space have changed over the past thirty years and corresponding accounts of how the potential for various types of electoral coalitions has shifted in that period.<sup>1</sup>

Our objectives are to fill this gap and use the resulting evidence to consider how the viability of different types of electoral coalitions has shifted over this period with a view to assessing competing explanations for the decline of mainstream parties and the rise of their challengers. For these purposes, we examine the movements of people in seven



**Figure 1: Share of votes for major party families in parliamentary elections 1980-2016**

*Notes:* Compiled by Simon Hix for 31 European countries.

different occupational groups across a two-dimensional electoral space in eight western democracies over the three decades from 1990 to 2018. Based on shifts in the attitudes of these groups to economic and cultural issues, we calculate the relative viability of four types of electoral coalitions corresponding to those often assembled by mainstream and challenger parties. We find evidence for many, but not all, explanations for the shifting electoral fortunes of these parties and for the contention that electoral competition now takes place along a new axis running from Green parties to radical right parties which scholars have associated with the relevance of a new ‘transnational’ cleavage.

## Contemporary contentions about electoral change

The contemporary literature advances a variety of propositions about how the shape of the electoral space has changed over the past thirty years and why support for mainstream parties has been declining. Some accounts advance several of these propositions, while others emphasize only one or two of them. They are as follows.

1. Perhaps the most prominent contention is that economic developments, associated with the decline of manufacturing, growth of service sector employment and transition to a knowledge economy, have fragmented the occupational structure, eroding the cleavage between a blue-collar working class and a white-collar middle class once central to European politics (Oesch 2008; Beramendi et al. 2015; Iversen and Soskice 2015; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). That cleavage is said to have given way to a wider array of occupational groups with more heterogeneous political preferences than those once displayed by blue- or white-collar workers. That heterogeneity may be rooted in disparities of occupational tasks, employment security, education or income (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Gethin et al. 2022). For convenience we will label this contention hypothesis **(H1)**.
2. Most analyses of the electoral space also contend that, alongside the economic issues once central to electoral competition, a new set of cultural issues have become increasingly important to voters and salient to electoral competition. These are issues associated with gender equality, gay rights, abortion and immigration.<sup>2</sup> As a result, new gaps have opened up between voters on cultural issues, scattering them more widely across an electoral space that is now two-dimensional (Inglehart 1990; Kitschelt 1994; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015). **(H2)**
3. Some accounts stress the importance of a growing gap on cultural issues between blue-collar and white-collar workers, often ascribed to the reaction of blue-collar

workers against the extent to which more educated employees have embraced post-material (or cosmopolitan/universalist) values (Norris and Inglehart 2019). **(H3)**

4. Others postulate increasing gaps in economic preferences between various segments of the working class, generally based on variations in employment security, although scholars disagree about where the greatest gaps lie. Some locate them between protected labor-market ‘insiders’ and more precarious ‘outsiders’ (Rueda 2005), others between skilled workers with specific skills and low-skilled workers with general skills (Iversen and Soskice 2015), and others between people in occupations facing higher versus lower labor market risk (Häusermann et al. 2015; Schwander 2020). **(H4)**
5. Some efforts to explain rising support for populist right parties attribute it to a reaction against the extent to which mainstream party platforms on economic issues converged during the 1990s. The argument is that those platforms failed to represent the views of working-class voters on such issues, thereby inspiring political alienation and a protest vote for anti-establishment parties (Spruyt et al. 2016; Berger 2017; Hopkin and Blyth 2019; Hopkin 2020). **(H5)**
6. Other analysts ascribe rising support for right populist parties to the increasing salience of cultural issues on the grounds that those parties appeal primarily on such issues, while mainstream parties rely more heavily on economic appeals (Bornschiefer 2010; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). **(H6)**
7. Finally, some scholars argue that, in the wake of eroding class and religious alignments, electoral competition now turns on a new transnational (or universalist-particularist) cleavage which pits parties promoting cosmopolitan values and slightly left-wing economic positions, including Green and some center-left parties, against populist right parties defending traditional values and more right-wing economic positions. The implications are that the principal axis

of political competition now runs along a diagonal cutting across the two-dimensional political space on which Green parties and radical right parties have become important contenders for power (Bornschieer 2010; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Rovny and Polk 2019a). (H7)

These are important contentions that, in one version or another, go some distance toward explaining why mainstream center-left and center-right parties have found it difficult to hold together the electoral coalitions that once kept them in office and why support has risen for parties of the populist right and left. As such, they deserve careful scrutiny.

Of course, there are multiple ways in which these contentions can be tested, and we do not attempt anything like complete assessments here. But these contentions embody claims about (i) how voters have moved in the electoral space over the past three decades, (ii) how the salience of different types of issues has changed, (iii) how party positions have shifted, and ultimately (iv) how the viability of the electoral coalitions that different types of political parties generally form has changed over these years. Those are the empirical issues addressed in this paper and, by examining them, we bring some evidence to bear on the plausibility of these contentions.

### **The approach**

Our first objective is to assess how the political attitudes of voters about economic and cultural issues, which form the basis for many partisan political appeals, have changed over the past thirty years; and our second objective is to assess how the viability of the electoral coalitions that political parties might form from groups of these voters has shifted during these decades. For these purposes, we consider groups of voters classified according to their position within the occupational structure and examine the movement of those groups within a two-dimensional issue space reflecting the positions taken by members of those

groups on economic and cultural issues. This approach to understanding how the viability of electoral coalitions changes has both limitations and advantages.

In our view, there is value in thinking in terms of electoral coalitions. The electoral success of political parties ultimately turns on how many votes they can secure and, except for the smallest of parties, securing those votes generally entails appealing to groups of people with diverse views. Accordingly, we focus on the process of coalition formation. Our conception of how such coalitions are formed may be more controversial because there are several different grounds on which people might vote for a party, and hence different ways in which parties can form coalitions. Partisan appeals can be based on the party's reputation for competent governance or on its stance toward a valence issue such as opposition to corruption. Alternatively, parties can appeal to the social identities of voters or attract them by disbursing goods in clientelist terms (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Green and Jennings 2017; Bornschier et al. 2021; Mierke-Zatwarnicki 2022). Coalition formation is inevitably a multifaceted process.

We focus, however, on the appeals that parties make to the political attitudes of voters, understood as the positions those voters take on the range of economic and cultural issues germane to electoral competition. Although appeals to political attitudes may not be the only basis for partisan support, it is difficult to imagine parties forming viable electoral coalitions without speaking to the political preferences of the voters within their coalitions. In corresponding terms, we assess the viability of a given electoral coalition by reference to how well it aggregates the preferences of the groups of which it is composed. The results are inevitably somewhat stylized for reasons we have noted, but we think that this is as likely as any other approach to capture the viability of alternative coalitions.

Parallel issues arise with respect to how the groups that make up electoral coalitions should be construed. In principle, these groups could be construed in any

number of ways, including in terms of religion, ethnicity, gender, age, or region of residence. For effective cross-national comparison, however, we need a schema delineating groups whose members tend to have similar political preferences that differ in similar ways across multiple countries. For these reasons, it makes sense to group voters based on their occupational class. Across countries, occupational class is systematically related to political preferences on the types of broad economic and cultural issues on which we focus (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Marks et al. 2022). Occupation is frequently used to delineate the groups forming electoral coalitions and doing so speaks to an important literature on class politics (Rydgren 2013; Beramendi et al. 2015). Accordingly, we chart the movement of occupational groups within a two-dimensional electoral space, reflecting the positions of those groups on economic and cultural issues, at three points in time over the period from 1990 to 2018. We then use this analysis to assess how the viability of alternative electoral coalitions has changed over these decades.

### **Movement in the electoral space**

We begin by considering how the attitudes of people in various occupational classes toward economic and cultural issues have changed over these years. For this purpose, we seek cross-national data from which comparable measures of citizens' attitudes on those issues can be constructed spanning the longest possible time period. The most comprehensive data we have been able to find with these features is in the World Values Surveys (WVS) and European Values Surveys (EVS) with which we can compare citizens' attitudes in 1990 (WVS wave 2 with about 13,000 respondents), 2006 (WVS wave 5 with about 19,000 respondents) and 2018 (EVS wave 5 with about 16,000 respondents) in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United States. We use demographic weights to secure representative samples of each national population.



### *Measuring occupational groups*

Based on self-reported occupation, we assign respondents to occupational groups designed to conform to the influential categories of Oesch (2006) which capture features of the workplace situation said to condition people's views on economic and cultural issues. Because of limitations in the WVS data, we can only approximate those categories, but we do so by grouping people into seven occupational groups according to the types of tasks associated with their employment. These groups are managers, professionals, high-skill white-collar workers, lower-level service workers, manual workers in crafts and trades, manual production workers, and small employers (for details of the classification, see Appendix A).

### *Assessing attitudes*

One advantage of the WVS is that attitudes can be measured using the same questions in every wave. We measure citizens' views about economic issues with questions about their attitudes to income inequality, private vs. state ownership of business, the responsibility of the government to provide for all, whether the unemployed should be forced to take a job, and whether competition is good or harmful. We assess views about cultural issues with questions about whether homosexuality and abortion are justifiable, how respondents feel about having immigrants, Muslims and people of a different race as neighbors, whether men have more of a right to work than women, and whether respect for authority is good or bad. Question wordings are in Appendix B.

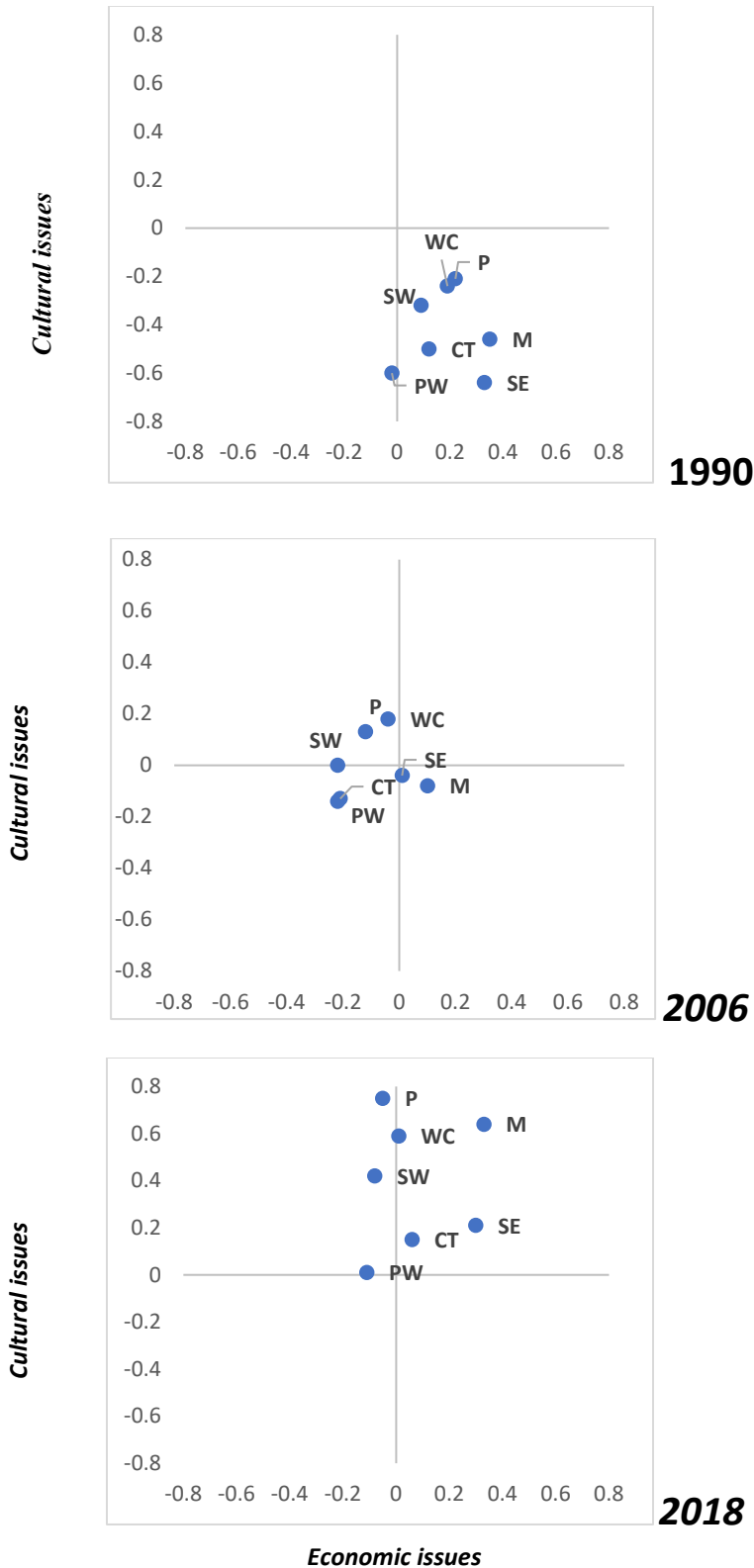
Using these questions, we construct indices for views on economic and cultural issues by estimating a confirmatory model for multidimensional item response parameters, based on Samejima's (1969) multidimensional ordinal response model because the data are ordinal (Chalmers 2012). Given our premise that these questions tap two distinct factors,

we constrain most of the variables to load onto one dimension. Our economic index reflects attitudes to redistribution and governmental activism, which we describe as left vs right, while the cultural index reflects a set of values we describe as cosmopolitan vs. traditional.<sup>3</sup> Details of the factor analysis are in Appendix C. The cross-national and over-time patterns observed with our measures correspond broadly to those found by Caughey et al. (2019) which enhances our confidence in the results.

#### *The movement of voters within a two-dimensional electoral space*

Using the average position on economic and cultural issues taken by members of each occupational group, we place these groups within a two-dimensional issue space at three points in time 1990, 2006 and 2018.<sup>4</sup> To secure comparability across time, the metric on the axes is based on standard deviations from the mean on the relevant dimension in the 1990 sample. The results for each country are reported in Appendix D, and we take an unweighted average of these to yield Figure 2 which documents the movement of occupational groups in these eight countries within the electoral space over the past three decades. Several general features of the movement of occupational groups within this electoral space are notable. The first reflects an important secular development. Over the course of these decades, the views of all occupational groups about cultural issues became consistently more cosmopolitan. All groups also moved to the left on economic issues between 1990 and 2006, perhaps as a ‘thermostatic’ reaction to the neoliberal policies pursued by most countries in this period (Soroka and Wlezien 2010), which was followed by a shift toward the right on economic issues in the subsequent decade. Despite these common movements, however, there was a striking stability to the positions that many of these occupational groups held relative to one another. On economic issues, manual production workers and lower-level service workers have generally held the most left-wing positions, while managers and small employers have anchored the right side of that axis.

**FIGURE 2: The location of occupational groups in the electoral space in 1990, 2006 and 2018 on average across all countries**



*Note:*

M: managers

P: professionals

WC: high-skill white-collar workers

SW: lower-level service workers

SE: small employers

CT: manual crafts and trades workers

PW: manual production workers

For point estimates see Appendix J at the end of the paper.

*Source:* Authors' calculations from WVS/EVS.

On cultural issues, professionals and senior white-collar workers have generally held the most cosmopolitan positions, while manual workers and small employers hold more traditional views.

Figure 2 confirms some of the central contentions in the literature about the changing bases for electoral competition. Since 1990, the electoral space has become more fragmented (**H1**). The people in these occupational groups hold more heterogenous views about economic and cultural issues than they did in 1990, *ipso facto* making it more difficult for political parties to form coalitions giving them pluralities or majorities. The standard deviation for the views of these groups on economic and cultural issues, respectively, rose from 0.13 and 0.17 in 1990 to 0.18 and 0.28 in 2018 (see Appendix J). It should be noted, however, that this movement is largely a development of the past 15 years. Between 1990 and 2006, the views of voters on both economic and cultural issues generally became more homogenous.

These calculations also confirm the contention (**H2**) that the fragmentation of the electorate is attributable largely to increasingly heterogeneity in these groups' views about cultural issues. On economic issues, the gap between the groups with the most left-wing and right-wing views increased by 14% between 1990 and 2018, but the gap between the groups with the most divergent views on cultural issues increased by 72%. The results are also consistent with the claim (**H3**) that there has been a striking divergence in views on issues of culture between blue-collar and white-collar workers. When we compare the average positions on cultural issues taken by manual workers to the positions taken by senior white-collar workers and professionals, we find that the gap between these groups on cultural issues increased by about 45% between 1990 and 2018.

There is mixed support here for the contention that variations in employment security have increased the differences in views about economic issues among various

segments of the labor force (**H4**). Since we lack measures for employment security, we can make only a few general observations. Over these decades, the economic views of production workers, many of whom are likely to have relatively secure employment, and lower-level service workers, many of whom work on secondary labor markets, have converged, calling into question suggestions that the expansion of secondary labor markets has created gaps between the views of lower-skill workers in manufacturing and services. However, the economic views of the working class are far from monolithic. Crafts and trades workers tend to be more right-wing on economic issues than the other two working-class groups and, of course, there are large and increasing gaps between manual workers and service workers on cultural issues.

#### *Party strategies*

In order to assess the next set of contentions about the rise of radical parties and decline of mainstream parties, we need to consider the movement of political parties in this electoral space and shifts in the electoral salience of cultural versus economic issues. As we note, some scholars have argued that rising support for populist parties was largely a reaction against the convergence of mainstream parties on economic issues during the 1990s and 2000s by voters seeking policies that mainstream parties no longer offered (**H5**). Did party platforms converge in those years? Were the positions taken by mainstream parties in this period largely unrepresentative of the views of major segments of the electorate?

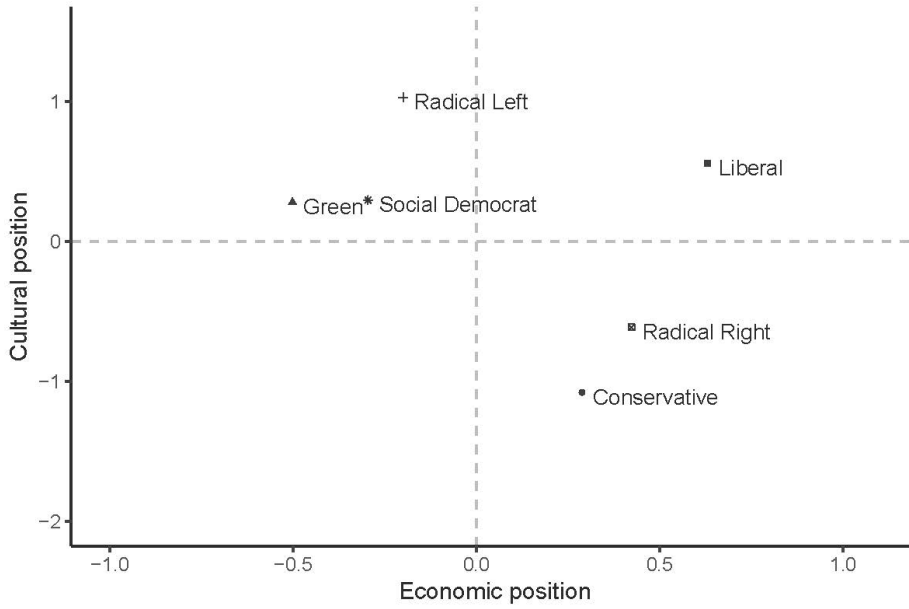
To position political parties in a comparable electoral space, we use the Manifesto Project (MP) dataset (Volkens et al. 2018). Compared to expert surveys, it has the advantages of covering the entire time-period we examine and of yielding measures based on the actual positions taken by parties in their electoral manifestos without any biases that expert evaluations might introduce. Parties generally seem to pursue the policies outlined in their manifestos (Thomson et al. 2017). To measure party positions on each dimension,

we use all the items in the MP dataset that cover the entire period and are clearly relevant. To assess the position of parties on economic issues, we use positive references to Keynesian demand management, nationalization, welfare state expansion and labor groups to indicate left positions; and we take positive references to a free market economy, market deregulation, limitations on the welfare state and negative references to labor groups to indicate right positions. To assess the position of parties on the cultural dimension, we use positive references to multiculturalism and underprivileged minority groups and negative references to nationalism and traditional morality to indicate cosmopolitan positions; and we take negative references to multiculturalism and positive references to nationalism and traditional morality to indicate more traditional views.

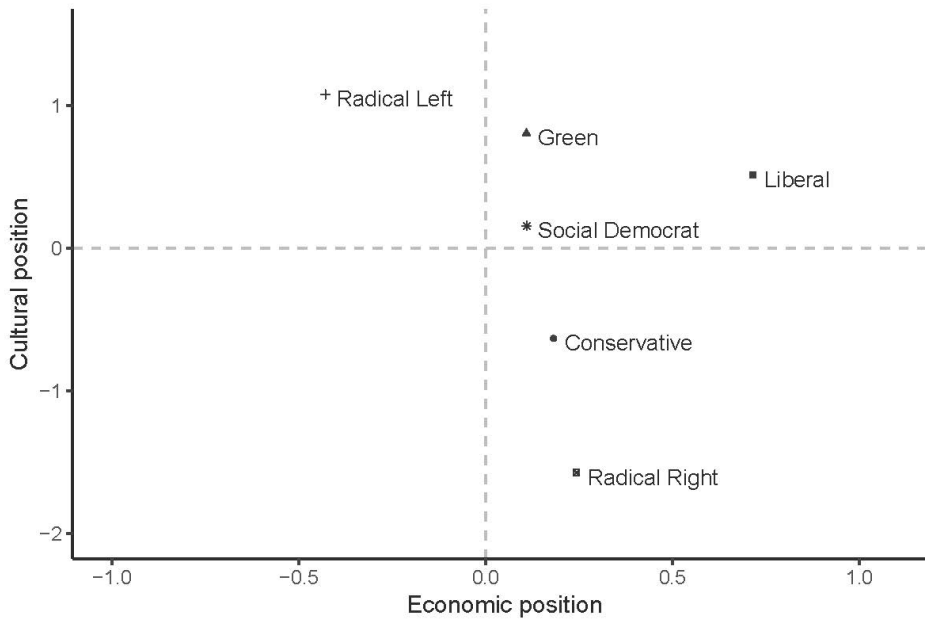
We aggregate these variables into indices for each party's position on economic and cultural issues following the widely used procedure of Lowe et al. (2011) based on logit scores. Compared to an approach that uses additive scales, this has the advantages that only variables associated with economic or cultural issues influence the estimated position of a party on economic or cultural issues respectively, and the contribution each additional sentence on a topic makes to the construction of the scale is weighted by reference to how many other sentences already address that topic (details in Appendix E). Aggregating across our eight countries, Figure 3 shows the positioning of the principal party families in this electoral space in 1990-91 (panel a) and in 2006-09 (panel b). The metric on the axes is scores on the two indices standardized across the full two-wave sample and centered on the 1990 mean. Although the electoral space in which we place parties is not identical to the one in which we place citizens, because the items used to measure positions on cultural and economic issues for parties and citizens are not identical, the two spaces are roughly commensurable for capturing the broad positions on these issues

**Figure 3: Positions of party families in the electoral space**

**Panel (a) circa 1990-91**



**Panel (b) circa 2006-09**



Source: MP.

on which we focus and especially for identifying the direction of movement over time in the positions of parties and voters.

Figure 3 confirms that the positions on economic issues of most parties, including mainstream center-left and center-right parties, did converge during the 1990s and early 2000s as scholars who interpret support for populist parties as a protest against this convergence contend. Panel (a) of the Figure shows that in 1990-91 the principal party families were located along a diagonal running from the north-west (NW) to the south-east (SE) quadrants of the electoral space. Liberal parties were the exception: they occupied a distinctive place in the northeast (NE) quadrant, seeking voters who combine cosmopolitan cultural views with right-wing positions on economic issues. By 2006-09, however, the economic platforms of most parties had converged to the right; and the axis of partisan competition shifted toward the vertical, reducing competition on economic issues in favor of competition on cultural issues (see also Kitschelt 2004). For national-level figures see Appendix F.

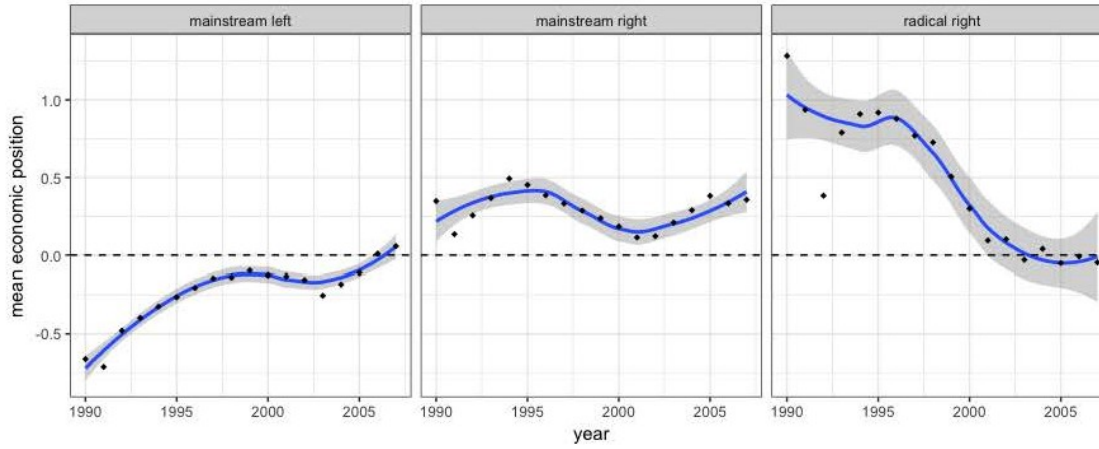
As a check on these results, we use the schema devised by Wagner and Meyer (2017) to group parties into the categories of mainstream left, mainstream right and radical right and examine the movement of these party families across all eight countries over the period between 1990 and 2009. The results in Figure 4 confirm that the most pronounced changes in the platforms of mainstream parties over this period were to the right on economic issues. However, it is also notable that radical right parties moved toward the center on economic issues, while taking more radical stances on cultural issues in these years (Rovny and Polk 2019; Harteveld 2016; Lefkofridi et al. 2014).

These results provide some support for the thesis that convergence in mainstream party platforms inspired rising support for the populist right. But did that convergence amount to a failure of representation that might have left voters feeling alienated from

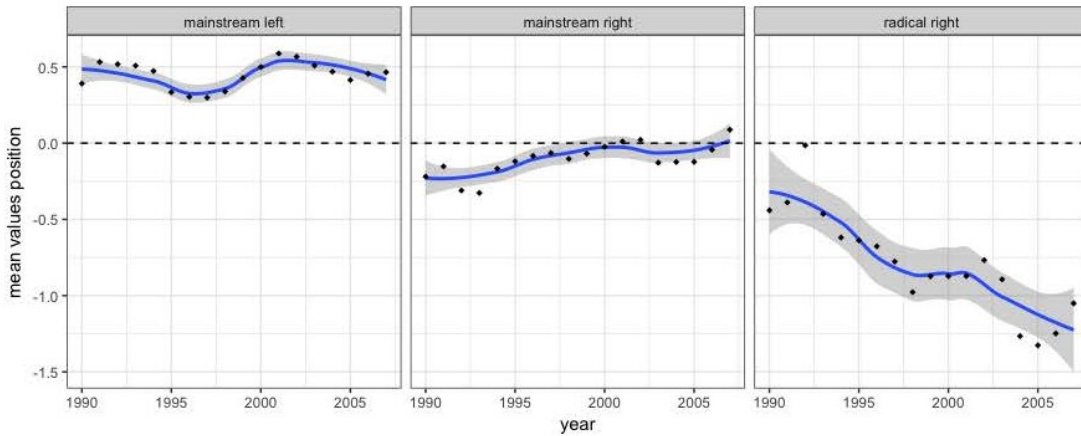


**Figure 4: Movement in party positions, 1990-2009**

**Panel (a) Movement on economic issues**



**Panel (b) Movement on cultural issues**



*Note:* Scatter plot and Loess smoothed curve for mean party family position on economic and cultural indices. Metric on y-axis is number of standard deviations above or below the 1990 mean in the sample. Higher scores indicate more right-wing positions on economic issues and more cosmopolitan positions on cultural issues. *Source:* MP.

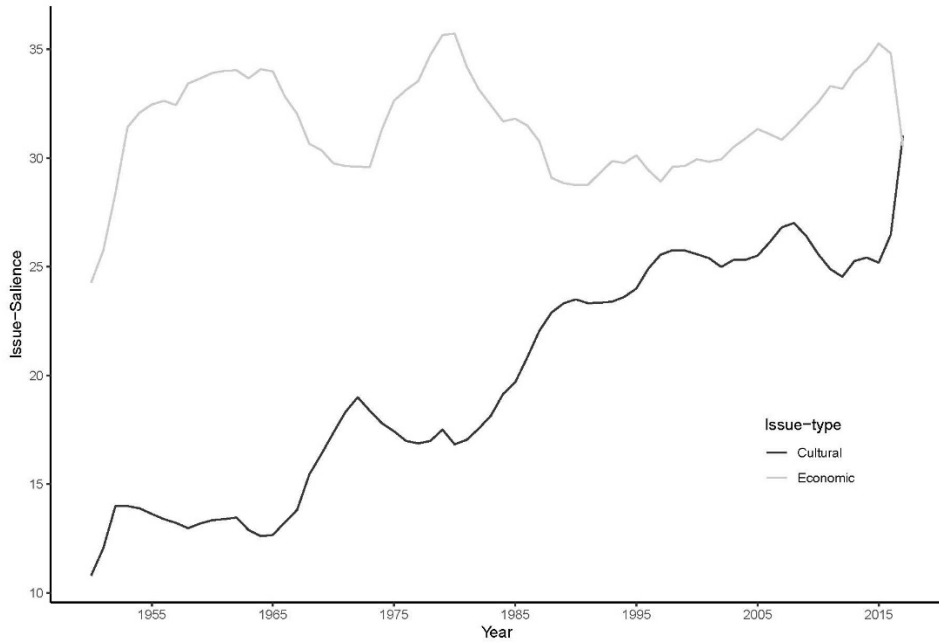
from established parties and so more prone to vote for their radical challengers? Here, a comparison between Figures 2 and 3 is instructive. It indicates that the economic platforms of mainstream parties moved to the right during a period when the economic views of most citizens moved to the left. Hence, many citizens were likely to believe that their economic preferences were not being reflected in partisan competition; and the occupational groups most likely to feel that their voices were not being heard, because they held the most left-wing economic views, were manual workers, who form one of the principal reservoirs of support for populist right parties (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). These results are broadly supportive of **H5**.

#### *Issue salience*

Many observers have noted that populist right parties base their appeals to voters primarily on cultural, rather than economic, issues with special emphasis on the cultural threats putatively posed by immigrants (Ivarsflaten 2008; Rovny 2019b). Therefore, rising support for populist right parties and declining support for mainstream parties may be attributable, at least in part, to an increase in the electoral salience of cultural issues relative to economic issues (**H6**). As Oesch and Rennwald (2018:14) note “depending on whether economic or cultural issues are more salient, production and service workers either choose the left or the radical right.”

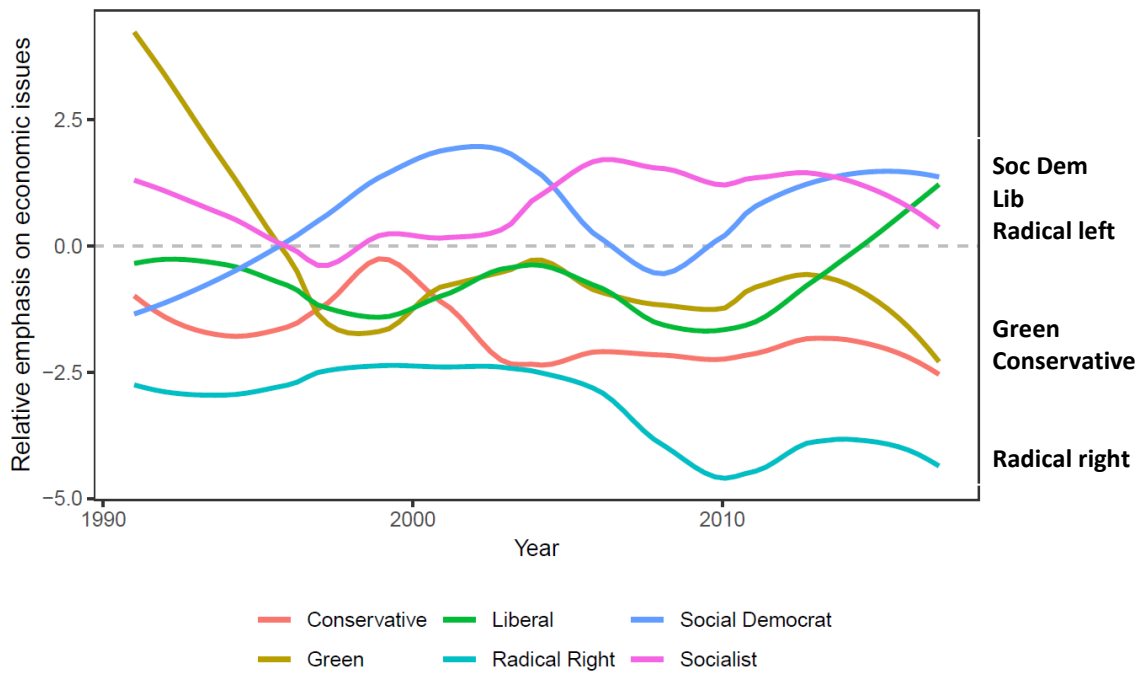
To assess this contention, in Figure 5 we report changes in the proportions of party manifestos devoted to cultural and economic issues across fourteen western democracies over the postwar period (details in Appendix G). This measure is widely considered a good indicator for how salient different types of issues are to electoral competition. It indicates that the salience of cultural issues increased dramatically during the 1980s and 1990s. Economic issues continued to command attention and rose in salience during the major

**Figure 5: The relative salience of economic and cultural issues in party platforms**



Note: Calculated from MP data. For the construction of the categories, see Appendix G.

**Figure 6: The relative emphasis on economic v cultural issues by type of party**



recessions of the 1970s and 2008-09. By 2016, however, economic and cultural issues were equally salience to electoral competition. This corresponds to the finding of Häusermann and Kriesi (2015) that by this time support for most political parties in Europe was more closely associated with voters' positions on cultural than on economic issues (see also Lachat 2008).

In some respects, these developments were not unexpected. To attract votes, political parties have to offer something distinctive to the electorate. When party platforms converge on economic issues, as they did during the 1990s and early 2000s, political parties have to find a different basis on which to distinguish themselves from their competitors and appeals on cultural issues proved to be an attractive alternative. However, some parties shifted their positions on cultural issues more dramatically than others – with implications for how effective their overall appeals were likely to be given the relative salience of different types of issues in the electoral arena. In that context, Figure 6, which displays changes in the balance of emphasis in the platforms of party families over this period, is instructive.<sup>5</sup> We can see that social democratic and radical left parties continued to give more prominence to economic than to cultural issues, while Green parties and conservative parties moved, along with the radical right, to put more emphasis on cultural issues. In a context where cultural issues were increasingly central to partisan competition, that may have left parties of the political left at an electoral disadvantage.

### **Competing electoral coalitions**

Building on this analysis of the movement of voters in the electoral space and shifts in the salience of issues, we turn now to the problem of assessing how the relative viability of the electoral coalitions underpinning mainstream center-left and center-right parties as well as their principal challengers has changed over the past three decades, with a view to pinpointing some of the factors that may lie behind these changes.

### *Identifying feasible coalitions*

As noted, we consider coalitions composed of voters grouped by occupation, and we focus on four potential coalitions corresponding to those that center-left, center-right, Green and radical right parties can be expected to try to assemble. For the purposes of this analysis, we specify that each coalition must include three occupational groups. Rarely can a party secure a dominant position in the legislature with votes from fewer groups, although some parties may command support from more. All the coalitions considered here encompass at least 35 percent of the electorate, the minimum share of the vote needed to dominate a coalition government in this era (see Armingeon et al. 2019), and in most cases they represent 40 to 50 percent of the electorate. Although the composition of party coalitions varies to some extent across countries and time, we focus on the typical coalitions these parties have tried to assemble, and our specification of the occupational groups in each coalition follows the findings from recent studies of partisan support (Oesch 2008; Geering and Häusermann 2013; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Gingrich 2017).

The coalition we term center-left is composed of professionals, skilled white-collar workers and higher-level manual workers in crafts and trades. This reflects the fact that social democratic parties generally try to assemble coalitions extending across these middle-class groups into the working class, higher levels of unionization among this group of manual workers renders them the most promising coalition partner (Knutsen 2009; Gingrich and Häusermann 2015; Mossiman and Pontusson 2017). The center-right coalition we consider is composed of professionals, skilled white-collar workers and small employers. This reflects the fact that center-right parties are unlikely to gain enough votes to dominate a legislature unless they secure substantial support from these two middle class groups as well as small employers. An alternative formulation would include managers as a key constituency for the center right, but small employers form a larger segment of the

electorate in our sample, and they are even more likely than managers to support the center right (Oesch 2008). For these reasons, Oesch and Rennwald (2018) identify small employers as the key swing group between the center-right and radical right.

We define the radical right coalition as one assembling support from manual workers in crafts and trades, manual production workers and small employers in line with studies indicating that these are the occupational groups most likely to support contemporary radical right parties (Bornschieer and Kriesi 2013; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Gidron and Hall 2019). Finally, we identify a fourth coalition, which we label a cosmopolitan coalition, joining professionals and skilled white-collar employees to low-skill service workers, on the premise that shared cultural outlooks among people working in the service sector make it a viable coalition, especially when the salience of cultural issues is high (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014). We see this as a coalition that might underpin Green parties or coalition governments composed of Green parties and parties of the center-left.

Of course, this exercise is to some extent stylized. Most parties secure at least some electoral support from more than three occupational groups. In some cases, our analysis accommodates that possibility because occupational groups with intermediate views fall within the electoral space circumscribed by the three coalition partners on which we concentrate. However, our specifications generally reflect the coalitions most likely to be propitious for each type of party; and, in robustness tests, we consider coalitions with different compositions that are the most feasible alternatives to those we focus on here. This analysis should be read as one assessing the potential for assembling coalitions seen as ideal types rather than as an account of the coalition assembled by any one party.

### *Assessing the viability of coalitions*

To assess the relative viability of coalitions, we adopt a standard spatial analysis based on the ideal points of occupational groups measured in terms of the average position taken by their members (McDonald and Budge 2005; Adams et al. 2005). We assume that parties offer a common program to the electorate. Of course, this is a simplifying assumption: parties sometimes emphasize specific appeals when communicating with specific groups of voters, hoping to assemble coalitions on a logrolling basis. But our assumption accords with studies pointing to the nationalization of party politics; and it is realistic in an era when parties publish national manifestos and rely heavily on widespread media coverage (Caramani 2009; Hopkin 2018).

In this context, the more similar the political attitudes of each occupational group are to those of other groups in the potential coalition, the easier it will be for a party to assemble support from these groups. Therefore, our measure for the viability of a coalition is the maximum distance in the electoral space that must be spanned if the coalition is to be assembled, ie. the distance between the groups in each coalition that are the most distant from one another. In the terms of spatial voting models, the smaller that distance, the closer the position of the party will be to the ideal points of all members of the coalition.

To account for shifts in the relative salience of economic and cultural issues, we consider three scenarios: one when economic issues dominate electoral competition, another when cultural issues dominate, and a third when voters accord economic and cultural issues roughly equal weight. We construe salience as a general feature of electoral competition at a given point in time, what Meyer and Wagner (2018) term ‘systemic salience’. Therefore, when electoral competition turns primarily on economic or cultural issues, the relative viability of coalitions will depend on the distance that each coalition spans along the axis reflecting the type of issue dominant at that time. However, our results

remain informative if salience is seen as a feature of coalitions rather than of electoral competition. In such cases, the electoral viability of a coalition depends on the maximum distance the coalition spans along the axis most salient to its supporters.

For cases in which economic and cultural issues are equally salient to electoral competition, to calculate the viability of each coalition, we use the triangle formed when the positions of the three occupational groups in each coalition are joined in this two-dimensional space. The smaller this triangle the more feasible it should be to form a coalition among the groups; and to assess the size of each triangle we calculate its centroid, namely the point at which lines joining each vertex with the midpoint of the opposite side intersect, and then sum the distances between the centroid and the vertices. The smaller this sum, the closer the three groups at the points of the triangle are to each other in the electoral space, and the more feasible it should be to form a coalition among them. We label this sum the ‘size’ of the triangle.

### *Empirical results*

Table 1 uses this approach and the positions within the electoral space of the occupational groups in the full cross-national sample displayed in Figure 2 to list the relevant coalitions, their share of the workforce, and our measures for the viability of each type of coalition in 1990, 2006 and 2018 under three scenarios that are based on the relative salience of economic and cultural issues. When economic issues dominate electoral competition, the relevant measure for the viability of a coalition is the distance separating the groups in it that are farthest apart on the economic axis (column 4). The corresponding measure for the viability of a coalition when cultural issues are dominant is in column 5. When economic and cultural issues are equally salient to electoral competition, the relevant measure is the size of the triangle joining the groups in each coalition (column 6).



**TABLE 1: Coalition potential in 1990, 2006 and 2018 for all countries**

<b>Coalition</b>	<b>Composition</b>	<b>Workforce Share</b>	<b>Max Distance Economic Axis</b>	<b>Max Distance Cultural Axis</b>	<b>Triangle Size</b>
<b>1990</b>					
Center-left	P + WC + CT	51%	<u>10</u>	29	38
Center-right	P + WC + SE	38%	14	43	57
Cosmopolitan	P + WC + SW	47%	13	<u>11</u>	<u>18</u>
Radical Right	CT + PW + SE	50%	35	14	44
<b>2006</b>					
Center-left	P + WC + CT	52%	17	31	45
Center-right	P + WC + SE	38%	<u>13</u>	22	33
Cosmopolitan	P + WC + SW	49%	18	18	<u>30</u>
Radical right	CT + PW + SE	47%	21	<u>10</u>	<u>30</u>
<b>2018</b>					
Center-left	P + WC + CT	58%	11	60	69
Center-right	P + WC + SE	53%	35	54	73
Cosmopolitan	P + WC + SW	76%	<u>9</u>	33	<u>38</u>
Radical right	CT + PW + SE	41%	41	<u>20</u>	53

Note: All distances in units multiplied by 100. Workforce share is based on the proportion of workers in each occupation in the weighted WVS/EVS sample.<sup>6</sup> The most viable coalitions in **bold**. Occupations are: M: managers; P: professionals; WC: skilled white-collar workers; SW: lower-level service workers; SE: small employers; CT: manual crafts and trades workers; PW: manual production workers

The results reported in Table 1 yield several conclusions. First, it is apparent that the viability of most coalitions turns on the relative salience of economic versus cultural issues. When economic issues dominate electoral competition (column 4), the mainstream coalitions of center-right, and especially the center-left, do relatively well. Conversely, when economic issues dominate, the radical right coalition is the least viable, but it often becomes the most viable when cultural issues dominate (column 5). When economic and cultural issues are equally salient, the coalition that emerges as most viable is the cosmopolitan coalition that Green parties and some center-left parties attempt to assemble. In short, this analysis confirms the contention that radical right parties are likely to benefit from developments that increase the salience of cultural issues relative to economic ones, and it suggests that the steady rise in the salience of such issues visible in Figure 5 helps to explain recent increases in support for those parties (**H6**). However, it is notable that, when economic and cultural issues are equally salient, a cosmopolitan coalition of the sort often assembled by Green parties also does well.

Second, these results show that the viability of alternative coalitions is conditioned, not only by issue salience, but also by the movement of social groups within the electoral space. By 2018, coalition formation had become more difficult for all parties because these groups of voters had moved substantially farther apart in the electoral space. Between 1990 and 2006, the fortunes of the center-left declined, relative to the center-right in particular, because manual workers moved far enough to the left on economic issues to make it difficult for those parties to sustain coalitions that combines professionals and other white-collar workers with segments of the manual working class. By 2018, however, the problem for the center-left was no longer so much divisions on economic issues, but an increasing gap between white-collar and blue-collar workers on cultural issues; and, if they

wanted to include small employers, parties of the center-right faced larger divisions on both economic and cultural issues.

Although substantial scholarly attention has recently been devoted to the radical right, one of the notable features of these results is how propitious the prospects are for what we have termed a cosmopolitan coalition of the sort assembled by Green parties, often in post-electoral coalitions with center-left parties. Several scholars have seen this as an important electoral development (Abou-Chadi et al. 2021). Figure 2 suggests that the viability of this coalition is based, on the one hand, on the willingness of professionals to embrace more egalitarian economic policies and, on the other hand, on the growing cosmopolitanism of employees in the service sector, including lower-level service employees. Attitudes on cultural issues are primarily what distinguishes these service-sector employees from those engaged in manual labor. It may be that the future of center-left parties rests on their capacities to assemble coalitions drawn largely from the service sector (see also Kitschelt and Rehm 2014).

These results also offer some support for the contention that the new fulcrum for electoral competition runs along an axis anchored by Green parties at one end and by radical right parties at the other end (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Marks et al. 2021) (H7). Figure 3 indicates that, as early as 2006-09, partisan competition was already taking place largely along a diagonal axis in which cultural issues played a central role, with highly cosmopolitan Green parties, slightly to the left on economic issues, facing off against radical right parties, espousing highly traditional values and slightly to the right on economic issues. Column 6 of Table 1 offers further support for this contention. It indicates that, under contemporary conditions when economic and cultural issues have roughly equal salience, the two most viable electoral contenders are the cosmopolitan coalition at which Green parties aim and the coalition that radical right

parties attempt to assemble. Further evidence would be needed to establish that this type of electoral competition reflects the emergence of a new ‘transnational’ social cleavage, but these calculations certainly suggest that the coalitions assembled by radical right and Green parties, which are often said to exemplify the two sides of this cleavage, now have an electoral viability rivaling that of the coalitions traditionally assembled by center-left and center-right parties.

### *Robustness tests*

To assess the robustness of these conclusions, we also compare the viability of these four types of coalitions when the occupational groups composing them are allowed to vary, subject to some criteria that preserve the basic nature of the coalition. These criteria are that: the center-right coalition must include managers or small employers, the center-left should include professionals or senior white-collar employees and either trades and crafts workers or production workers, while the radical right coalition must include small employers and some segment of manual workers. The specifications for the cosmopolitan coalitions do not change. We then calculate the viability of coalitions (as in Table 1) for all possible coalitions subject to these criteria and identify the most viable alternative coalitions for each time period under conditions that vary issue salience. The results are reported in Appendix H. Not surprisingly, the electoral contests become tighter, but the relative viability of the various coalitions does not change much. The main differences are that the center-right becomes more competitive in 2018 and the radical right more competitive in 1990.

As additional robustness tests, we also examine the movement of occupational groups in each national electoral space and replicate the coalitional analysis for individual countries. As Appendix D indicates, there are some national variations in those movements, but also substantial commonalities. In all countries, most occupational groups

move in cosmopolitan directions on cultural issues over this period. In most countries, these groups also move to the left on economic issues between 1990 and 2006 and then back toward the center by 2018. By then, a significant gap on cultural issues between professional or skilled white-collar workers and manual workers has appeared in all countries. In most, skilled white-collar workers also move somewhat to the left on economic issues between 1990 and 2018.

Based on these movements, Appendix I reports our calculations for the relative viability of coalitions at the national level in all 23 of the country waves we have available under scenarios that vary the salience of economic versus cultural issues as before. Again, there are some national variations, but the results are broadly congruent with the conclusions we have reached. When economic issues dominate electoral contestation, the coalitions associated with mainstream center-left and center-right parties emerge as the most viable in 14 of these 23 national cases and the radical right in only one. By contrast, when cultural issues dominate, a radical right coalition becomes the most viable in 13 cases. When economic and cultural issues are equally salient, the coalitions most likely to be viable are either those of the radical right (8 cases) or the cosmopolitan coalition (13 cases). In 2018, when economic and cultural issues are taken as equally salient, the most viable coalitions are always either those of the radical right or the cosmopolitan coalition.

## **Conclusion**

Using measures that are comparable across time and countries, we have examined the movement of occupational groups within the electoral space over the past thirty years in eight developed democracies with a view to assessing multiple contentions about how electoral competition has changed and why mainstream parties are losing support to challenger parties. Combining this data with evidence for the movement of political parties and changes in the salience of economic and cultural issues, we find support for some of

the most important of those contentions. We then apply spatial analysis to this data to assess the relative viability of the electoral coalitions typically formed by mainstream and challenger parties. These results augment a literature that has been based largely on cross-sectional analyses or electoral changes considered over shorter periods of time.

We find that, although all occupational groups have become more cosmopolitan over time, the gaps between these groups on cultural issues have increased at the same time as those issues have become more electorally salient. Over the same thirty years, differences between these groups on economic issues have also increased, albeit more modestly. As a result, the electorate is significantly more fragmented than it was in 1990 or 2006, and it has become more difficult for all parties to hold together electoral coalitions. However, the increasing salience of cultural issues relative to economic issues has disadvantaged mainstream parties of the center-left and center-right and rendered the coalitions formed by radical right parties and Green parties and some center-left parties more viable. These findings support the contention that the principal axis of electoral competition in the western democracies now runs along a diagonal in this two-dimensional electoral space with Green parties at one end and radical right parties at the other. The types of coalitions that these challenger parties try to assemble now seem to be at least as viable, if not more so, as the coalitions that mainstream parties on the center-left and center-right have traditionally attempted to assemble.

However, our evidence suggests that these electoral developments do not necessarily reflect inexorable trends. Between 1990 and 2006, the movements of some occupational groups in this electoral space were quite different from those that occurred between 2006 and 2018. In the earlier period, most occupational groups moved to the left on economic issues and assumed more similar positions on cultural issues, while the later period saw many groups move back to the right on economic issues and a considerable

fragmentation on cultural issues. Similarly, there are some important national variations noted in our appendices.

A number of caveats must accompany the analysis. Given the extent to which people's jobs condition their economic and cultural attitudes (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014), we think that occupational coalitions command attention. However, occupational groups are not the only social groups from which coalitions can be formed (cf. Liberini et al. 2020); and, as we have noted, parties can also mount appeals that do not turn on the political preferences of groups (cf. Healy and Malhotra 2013; Green and Jennings 2017). It may also be possible to form occupational coalitions based on preferences more specific than those tapped by our measures for economic and cultural attitudes. A recent literature suggests, for instance, that different occupational groups support different types of social policies (Green-Pedersen and Jensen 2019; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019; Häusermann et al. 2019). However, it is not yet clear that preferences over different types of social policies condition voting decisions substantially more than the broad economic and cultural attitudes on which we concentrate, especially since party manifestos continue to highlight the issues tapped by our measures (cf. Garritzmann et al. 2018). Our analysis is also limited by the fact that our data lack some intermediate occupational categories, such as those of technical workers, from which different coalitions might be assembled (cf. Oesch 2013; Wren and Rehm 2013).

This analysis opens a promising agenda for further research. Although we believe that the national nature of electoral campaigns makes it reasonable to treat the salience of economic and cultural issues as general features of the electoral context, some occupational groups may give more weight in their voting decisions to economic issues, and others to cultural issues, (Lachat 2008; Lefkofridi et al. 2014). Variations in turnout across

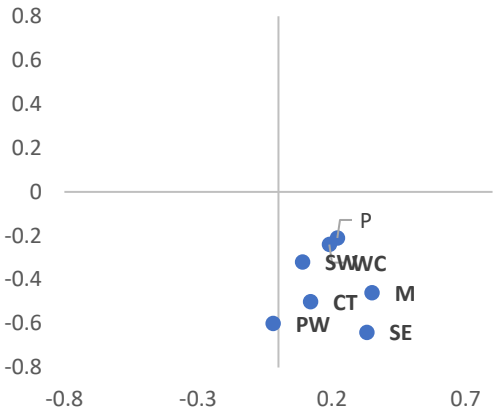
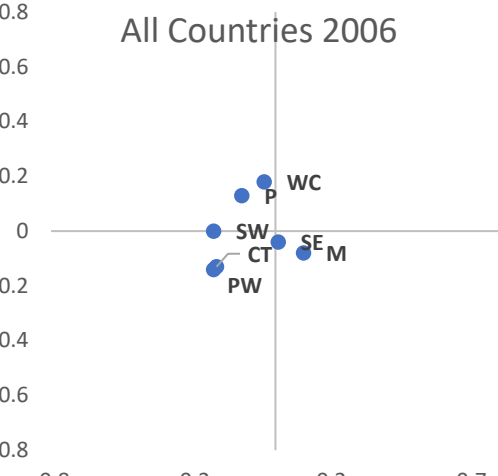
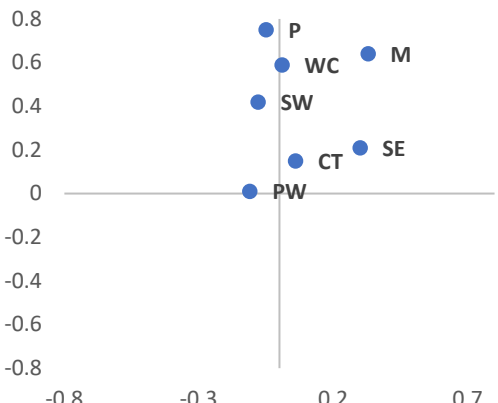
occupational groups may also affect the viability of coalitions. We see promise in incorporating these considerations into subsequent analyses.

By tracing the movement of occupational groups within the electoral space of developed democracies over thirty years, this paper also directs attention, which has often been focused on short-term changes in electoral results, toward long-term changes in attitudes and electoral behavior. It lays the groundwork for asking: how should long-term movements in the positions of occupational groups be explained? Is the growing cosmopolitanism of the electorate largely a matter of generational replacement or increases in service employment? Why do the attitudes of most occupational groups to economic issues shift to the left between 1990 and 2006 only to move to the right in subsequent decades? Why have professionals moved significantly to the left on economic issues? In this context, there is also scope for explaining cross-national variation in these long-term movements.

We do not attempt to answer such questions in this paper, but they deserve more attention. To some extent, cross-sectional analyses of the sort we have cited provide evidence that can be brought to bear on these issues, and some studies approach them with arguments or data that range over longer periods of time (Beramendi et al. 2015; Iversen and Soskice 2015; Kitschelt and Rehm 2019; Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021; Gethin et al. 2022). However, there is a need for further research focused on changes in electoral behavior over long periods of time, especially with an eye to exploring the relationships between changes in attitudes and important secular trends that have been transforming contemporary political economies. In short, we hope that this paper advances an agenda that will integrate the study of electoral politics with comparative political economy.



**Appendix J: Figures for the precise positions of occupational groups in the electoral space**

<p style="text-align: center;">All Countries 1990</p> 		<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>%</th> <th>Econ</th> <th>Values</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>M</td> <td>3</td> <td>0.35</td> <td>-0.46</td> </tr> <tr> <td>P</td> <td>12</td> <td>0.22</td> <td>-0.21</td> </tr> <tr> <td>WC</td> <td>18</td> <td>0.19</td> <td>-0.24</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SW</td> <td>18</td> <td>0.09</td> <td>-0.32</td> </tr> <tr> <td>CT</td> <td>22</td> <td>0.12</td> <td>-0.50</td> </tr> <tr> <td>PW</td> <td>15</td> <td>-0.02</td> <td>-0.60</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SE</td> <td>8</td> <td>0.33</td> <td>-0.64</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SD</td> <td></td> <td>0.13</td> <td>0.17</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		%	Econ	Values	M	3	0.35	-0.46	P	12	0.22	-0.21	WC	18	0.19	-0.24	SW	18	0.09	-0.32	CT	22	0.12	-0.50	PW	15	-0.02	-0.60	SE	8	0.33	-0.64	SD		0.13	0.17
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<p style="text-align: center;">All Countries 2006</p> 		<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>%</th> <th>Econ</th> <th>Values</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>M</td> <td>4</td> <td>0.01</td> <td>-0.08</td> </tr> <tr> <td>P</td> <td>14</td> <td>-0.12</td> <td>0.13</td> </tr> <tr> <td>WC</td> <td>15</td> <td>-0.04</td> <td>0.18</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SW</td> <td>20</td> <td>-0.22</td> <td>0.0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>CT</td> <td>22</td> <td>-0.21</td> <td>-0.13</td> </tr> <tr> <td>PW</td> <td>16</td> <td>-0.22</td> <td>-0.14</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SE</td> <td>9</td> <td>0.01</td> <td>-0.04</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SD</td> <td></td> <td>0.13</td> <td>0.12</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		%	Econ	Values	M	4	0.01	-0.08	P	14	-0.12	0.13	WC	15	-0.04	0.18	SW	20	-0.22	0.0	CT	22	-0.21	-0.13	PW	16	-0.22	-0.14	SE	9	0.01	-0.04	SD		0.13	0.12
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<sup>1</sup> For parallel studies with different analytical ambitions, see Caughey et al. 2019 and Gethin et al. 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Although some analysts treat attitudes to immigration as a separate factor (eg. Caughey et al. 2019) and there are some grounds for that supposition, in our factor analysis it loads in a congruent way with the other views we associate with cultural attitudes, and we treat it as a component of those attitudes in the interest of identifying a two-dimensional issue space (see Appendix B).

<sup>3</sup> Other terms used for roughly similar spectrums are left-libertarian v right-authoritarian (cf. Kitschelt 2004) and universalism v particularism (cf. Häusermann and Kriesi 2015).

<sup>4</sup> We consider the U.S. only in the first two periods because there is no comparable data for it in 2018.

<sup>5</sup> The measures for this Figure are based on sum of the variables used to measure a party's position on economic issues divided by the sum of the variables used to calculate a party's position cultural issues using the items from the Manifesto Project detailed in Appendix G. We interpolate scores for each party between election years and take the mean by party family across all countries for each year. The scores are then standardized.

<sup>6</sup> Because the groups forming the radical right coalition are underrepresented in the EVS sample, the workforce share reported for that coalition in 2018 is an average from national labor force figures, and, because we lack reliable American data for 2018, the estimates for that year do not include the U.S.