

Is the US Experience Exceptional?

Research by European scholars clearly answers yes. Their studies paint a picture that is the mirror image of that in the United States. The political class in European democracies is depolarizing and/or de-sorting. But as in the United States, this development appears to be only weakly tied to changes in their electorates. European electorates show some sorting but a great deal of stability. Regrettably, these studies do not suggest any mechanisms that might lead to de-sorting in the United States. One development that might (or might not) be related to elite depolarization in Europe is the rise of far-right (i.e., anti-immigrant) parties.

MORRIS P. FIORINA

Series No. 8

“The American experience of increasing polarization is untypical: most other countries witnessed constant or declining levels of polarization. In recent years, American levels of polarization are particularly high in comparative perspective.”—Philip Rehm and Timothy Reilly

Attempts to explain American political developments naturally begin with a focus on factors present and operating in the United States. But it is generally prudent to consider the experiences of other advanced democracies as well. If similar factors are present in other countries and similar developments are evident, that reinforces confidence in our explanations. But if similar developments are (or are not) occurring in other countries in the absence (or presence) of factors thought to be causal in the United States, that raises the likelihood that other, more general explanatory forces are at work.

Given the attention paid to the subject of political polarization in the United States, it is not surprising that political scientists in other countries have closely examined their politics to see if comparable developments are present. The findings reported in their studies are both puzzling and provocative, for they describe the opposite of American developments. As in the United States, Western European electorates in the aggregate have changed little or not at all in recent decades. But at the higher reaches of their political parties, the opposite of what we have seen in the United States has happened: the major parties have *depolarized*.

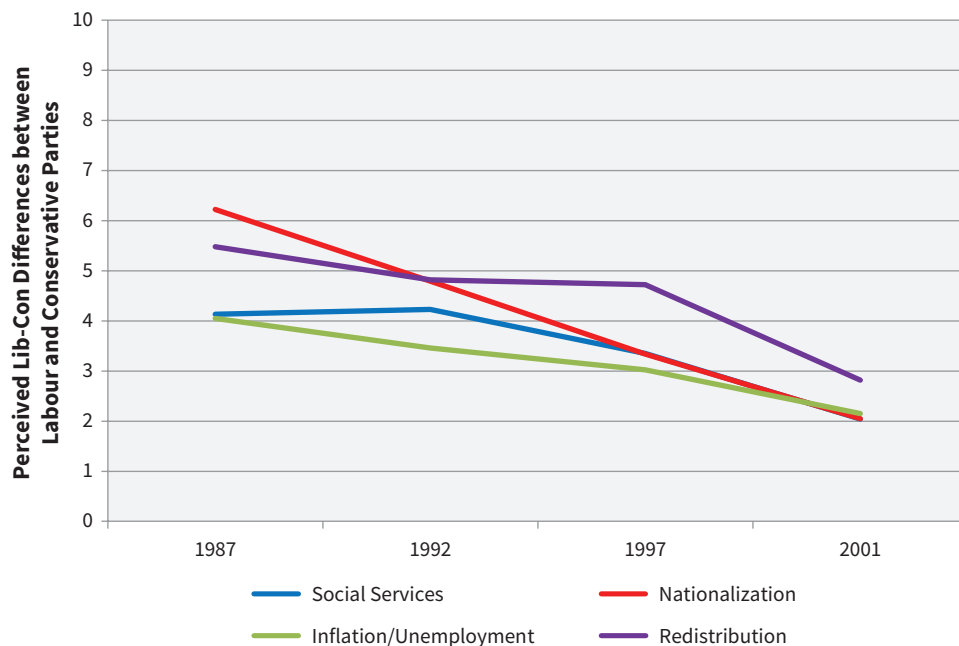
Depolarization in Western European Democracies

Several studies conducted in Great Britain illustrate the general pattern. The Tories have softened their platform considerably since the days of Margaret Thatcher, to the point that some argue they now more closely resemble the American Democrats

Philip Rehm and Timothy Reilly, “United We Stand: Constituency Homogeneity and Comparative Party Polarization,” *Electoral Studies* 29 (2010): 48.



Figure 1. Perceived Differences Between the Labour and Conservative Parties Have Declined



Source:

Adams, Green, and Milazzo, "Has the British Public Depolarized Along With Political Elites?," Table 1.

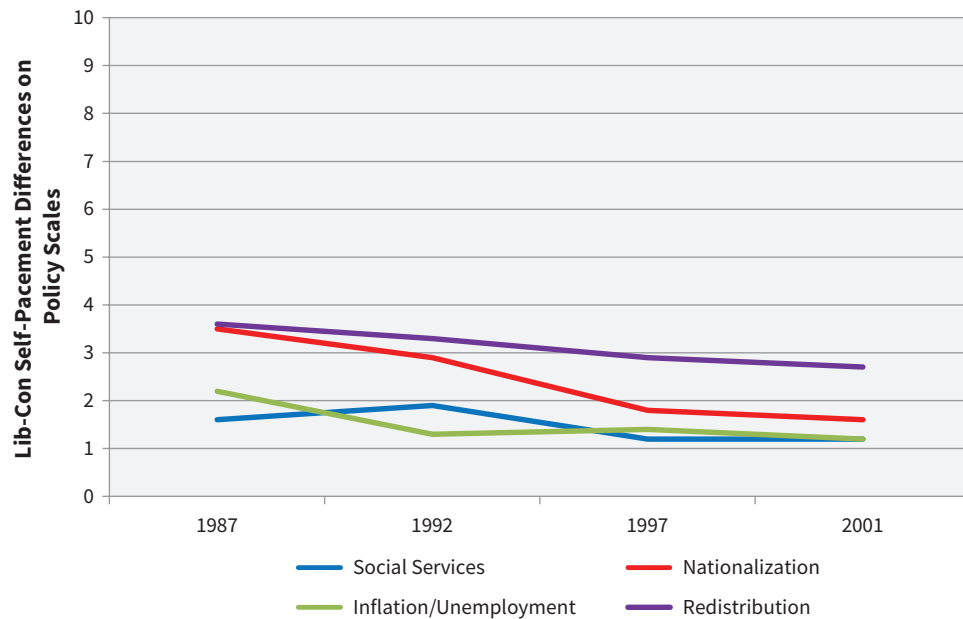
than the Republicans.¹ Meanwhile, under the leadership of Tony Blair, the Labour Party transitioned from the militant union-dominated party that Thatcher vanquished to a more garden-variety center-left party.² James Adams, Jane Green, and Caitlin Milazzo wrote in 2012, "In contrast to American elites' policy polarization, British politics over the past 20 years has witnessed dramatic depolarization, that is, policy convergence, between the elites of the two dominant political parties, Labour and the Conservatives."³ Like their counterparts in the United States, the British public recognizes what has occurred at the elite level. The British Election Study includes four categories of issues; within each cluster the British public saw a dramatic drop in the distance between the positions of the Conservative and Labour parties between 1987 and 2001 (figure 1).

1 Jim Messina, "Why the GOP Can't Get No Satisfaction," *Real Clear Politics*, May 17, 2015, www.realclearpolitics.com/2015/05/17/why_the_gop_can039t_get_no_satisfaction_357195.html.

2 In the years following Blair's prime ministership, Ed Miliband led Labour back to its old ways with seriously negative consequences in the 2015 general election. And as noted in the previous essay, with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as their leader, Labourites seem determined to keep digging.

3 James Adams, Jane Green, and Caitlin Milazzo, "Has the British Public Depolarized Along With Political Elites? An American Perspective on British Public Opinion," *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 4 (April 2012): 507–30.

Figure 2. Actual Differences between Labour and Conservative Partisans Have Declined



Source:

Adams, Green, and Milazzo, "Has the British Public Depolarized Along With Political Elites?," Table 5.

Did the British public depolarize in tandem with elite depolarization? As in the United States, the evidence for a connection between public opinion and elite positioning is largely negative: in the aggregate public opinion in Britain has changed very little. Adams, Green, and Milazzo examine the frequency of extreme responses on the issues and the standard deviation of responses (both of which should decline if the public were depolarizing) and report that "during the time period when the British public perceived dramatic policy convergence between Labour and Conservative elites on all four of these policy dimensions, the public itself depolarized significantly on only one dimension, inflation/unemployment."⁴

Significantly, Adams, Green, and Milazzo report that as British elites depolarized party de-sorting has occurred. As graphed in figure 2, "The mean distance between Labour and Conservative partisans decreased on each policy scale. In addition, on three of the four scales this mass partisan convergence was dramatic, with the policy gap between Conservative and Labour identifiers diminishing by roughly 50%."⁵ There was no significant decline in attitude consistency, however. In the United States, as party elites sorted and polarized, attitude consistency in the public increased. In Great Britain, as

⁴ Ibid., 515–516.

⁵ Ibid., 519.



party elites depolarized, voters de-sorted, but attitude consistency in the public did not decrease.

In a more detailed follow-up study, Adams, Green, and Milazzo report that the patterns noted above are “moderately” more pronounced among the more educated, affluent, and politically informed, but are apparent even among those who do not fall into those categories.⁶ All in all, the changes in Britain are the mirror image of those we have described in the United States: as elites depolarized, the public de-sorted, with the patterns more pronounced among the more politically informed and involved.

Since 2013 Germany has been governed by a grand coalition of the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats. (American readers should try to imagine the Democrats and Republicans splitting the congressional leadership posts and committee chairs, dividing up the cabinet departments and regulatory agencies, agreeing to alternate Supreme Court appointments, etc.) Simon Munzert and Paul Bauer ask whether German public opinion has tracked the dramatic depolarization of the parties that has occurred in Germany.⁷ The answer again is no.

Their study is modeled on Delia Baldassari and Andrew Gelman’s study of US public opinion and focuses primarily on attitude consistency.⁸ Thus, it is more a study of party sorting than of polarization, as we discussed in essays 2 and 3.⁹ The authors examine twenty-four survey items from the biennial German ALLBUS survey categorized into four domains: gender, moral, distribution, and immigration. They report a general decrease in attitude consistency both within and between the issue domains, which they consider “strong indicators of public opinion depolarization.”¹⁰ The gender domain is the exception, where consistency among those with lower levels of education has increased, leading to an overall increase in attitude consistency among items like female employment quotas and child care issues. The authors suggest that gender is “one of the few remaining cleavages” between the Left and Right.¹¹

6 James Adams, Jane Green, and Caitlin Milazzo, “Who Moves? Elite and Mass-level Depolarization in Britain, 1987–2001,” *Electoral Studies* 31, no. 4 (December 2012): 643–655.

7 Simon Munzert and Paul C. Bauer, “Political Depolarization in German Public Opinion, 1980–2010,” *Political Science Research and Methods* 1, no. 1 (June 2013): 67–89.

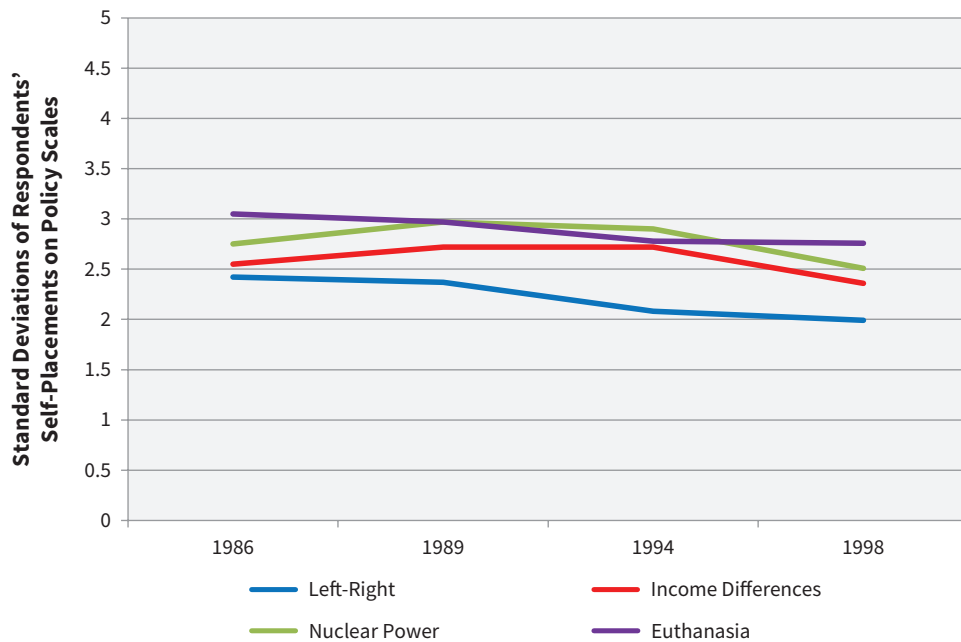
8 Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman, “Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion,” *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 2 (September 2008).

9 As in the American literature, the concept of “polarization” is used in different ways by European researchers and often conflated with sorting.

10 Ibid., 77.

11 Ibid., 79.

Figure 3. Standard Deviations of Dutch Self-Placements on Policy Scales Have Declined



Source:

Adams, De Vries and Leiter, "Subconstituency Reactions to Elite Depolarization in the Netherlands," Table 2.

In a subsidiary analysis, the German researchers calculate the standard deviations of responses to the issue items. While the overall trend is one of declining standard deviations—depolarization—the trends are not statistically significant. Again, movement on gender issues runs counter to the prevailing trends but not significantly so.

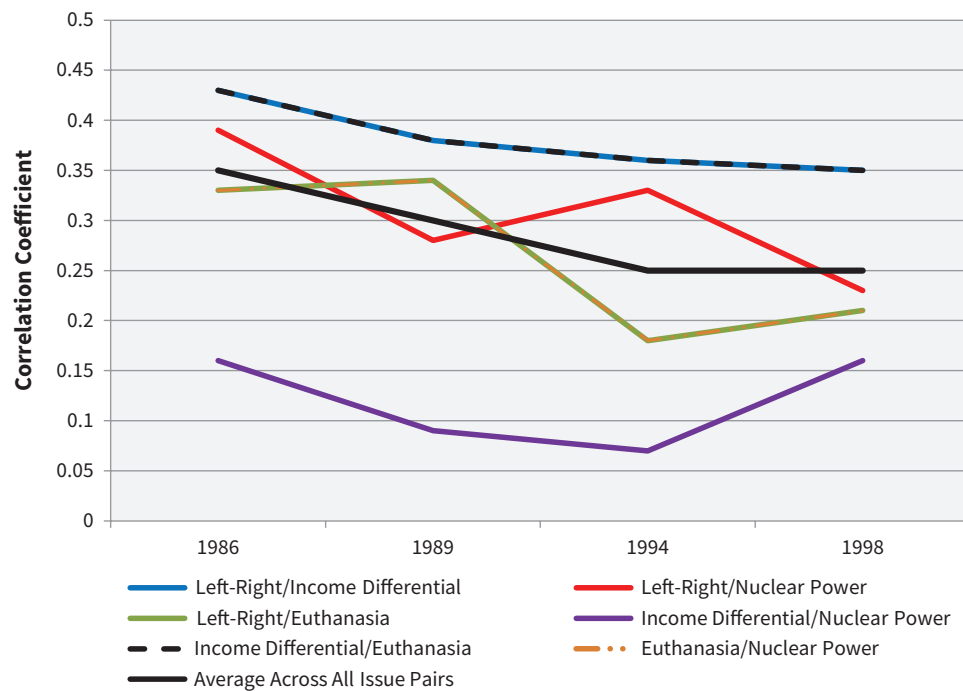
According to James Adams, Catherine De Vries, and Debra Leiter, "During the 1980s and the 1990s, the elites of the two largest Dutch parties converged dramatically in debates on income redistribution, nuclear power, and the overall Left-Right dimension."¹² Again, the Dutch public clearly recognized the convergence—the perceived gap between the positions of the two major parties on the issues declined significantly during the period studied. The researchers calculated three measures that have been used to study polarization. First is the standard deviation of public opinion on the issues. Figure 3 shows that the standard deviations of public opinion have declined—less polarization in the sense of attitude extremity.

As in the British and German studies, the researchers also calculated trends in consistency of attitudes, finding again that issue consistency generally has decreased as party elites

12 James Adams, Catherine E. De Vries, and Debra Leiter, "Subconstituency Reactions to Elite Depolarization in the Netherlands: An Analysis of the Dutch Public's Policy Beliefs and Partisan Loyalties, 1986–98," *British Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 1 (January 2012): 81.



Figure 4. Correlations between Dutch Self-Placements on Issues Have Generally Declined



Source:

Adams, De Vries and Leiter, "Subconstituency Reactions to Elite Depolarization in the Netherlands," Table 3.

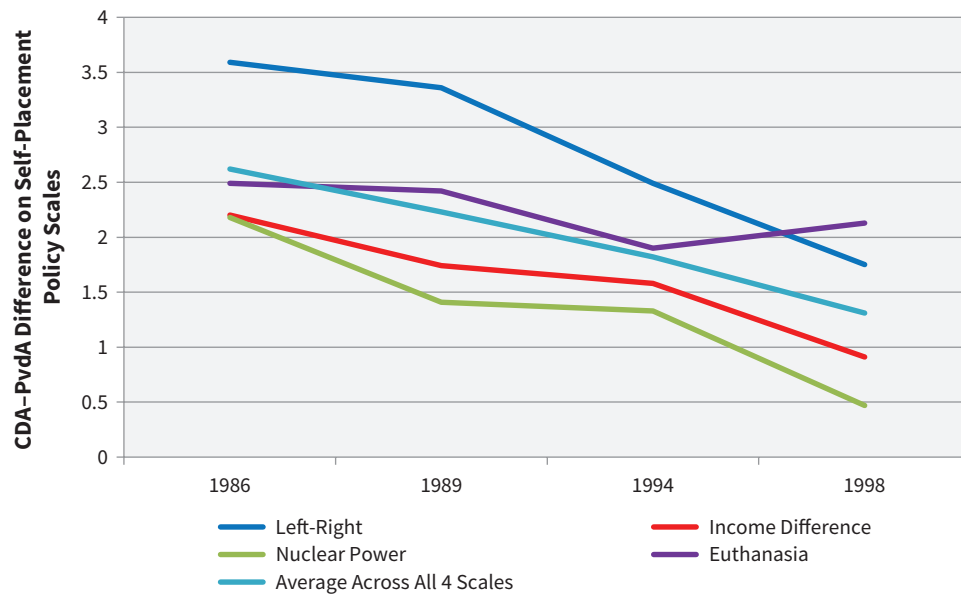
depolarized (figure 4). And finally, as party elites depolarized, the Dutch public de-sorted: the policy distance between adherents of the two major parties lessened over the period studied (figure 5). The researchers conclude that the Dutch public clearly depolarized as Dutch party elites did. Moreover, these trends extended throughout the population ("subconstituencies") and were not limited to the more educated and more involved stratum of the public.

In the most ambitious study I have found, Rehm and Reilly compare polarization in the United States with that in eight other member nations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, incorporating in their measure of party polarization considerations of party size and internal homogeneity.¹³ As quoted at the beginning of this essay, they conclude that "the American experience of increasing polarization is untypical: most other countries witnessed constant or declining levels of polarization. In recent years, American levels of polarization are particularly high in comparative perspective, at least according to expert and mass-level perception scores of party positions."¹⁴

¹³ Rehm and Reilly, "United We Stand," 40–53.

¹⁴ Ibid., 48.

Figure 5. Partisan Differences in Dutch Self-Placements on Policy Scales Have Declined



Source:

Adams, De Vries and Leiter, "Subconstituency Reactions to Elite Depolarization in the Netherlands," Table 4.

Although we have not found systematic studies in other countries,¹⁵ informal communications and media reports suggest trends similar to those discussed above. Italian colleagues report that their major parties are much closer than a generation ago—not to mention that the entire party system is more fractured. In France, the Hollande socialist government has adopted more centrist pro-business policies. According to one Bloomberg commentator, all over Europe the mainstream parties have converged "into a kind of colorless sludge."¹⁶

So, this comparative survey has identified another instance of American exceptionalism. Party politics in the United States appears to be following a path opposite to the one followed by the parties in other developed democracies. A generation ago the conventional wisdom held that the platforms ("manifestos") of European parties were much more divergent than those of the American parties. Sports allusions were common. Scholars quipped that the Europeans played varsity politics while the Americans played intramural, or that American politics was played entirely between the forty-yard lines while Europeans

15 This may be a matter of an American scholar not knowing where to look, rather than the absence of other studies.

16 Leonid Bershidsky, "Syriza, Le Pen and the Power of Big Ideas," Bloomberg, January 26, 2015, www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-01-26/syriza-le-pen-and-the-power-of-big-ideas.



used the entire field. No more. How do we account for such a reversal in politics within the course of a mere generation?

Lessons from the Comparative Findings?

Puzzles and contradictions are great stimuli for social science research. How might we explain the opposing trajectories of elite polarization in Europe and the United States? Start with the most obvious possibilities. The United States is one of a minority of world democracies that utilize the single-member, simple-plurality electoral system, sometimes called “majoritarian” for short. (As I noted in essay no. 5, this electoral system “manufactures” majorities.) In contrast, most of the European democracies use some variant of proportional representation.¹⁷ But Great Britain is an even purer example of a majoritarian electoral system. The pattern of elite decentralization there resembles that in the proportional systems of the continent; hence, the electoral system alone does not seem to be the determining factor.¹⁸

Multiple parties—a correlate of the electoral system—is a more likely possibility. Rarely do parties other than the Democrats and Republicans get more than a trivial percentage of the popular vote in US presidential elections.¹⁹ But even in Great Britain, a third party, now the Liberal Democrats, has been contesting elections for a century.²⁰ Regional parties, especially the Scottish Nationalist Party, have surged, and a new UK Independence Party appeared on the scene in the 1990s. One obvious question is whether there is a relationship between the rise of other parties and the convergence of Labour and the Conservatives.

The experience of continental democracies raises the same question. In Germany, the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats dominated post-World War II politics, but a small Free Democratic Party often held the balance of power.²¹ A “green” party currently holds about 10 percent of the seats. Elsewhere in Europe, multiple parties and coalition

17 The French electoral system is most similar to that in the United States. France has an independently elected president, and members of the National Assembly are elected from single-member districts by plurality vote. Germany uses a hybrid system where half the members of the Bundestag are elected from single-member districts and the other half from party lists. But the number taken from the lists is determined in such a way that the overall seat distribution is proportional to the popular vote.

18 A majority of the House of Commons is essentially the entire government. There is neither an independent executive nor a co-equal upper chamber as in the United States.

19 Generally the total vote for all “other” parties is less than 5 percent. Major recent exceptions are George Wallace, the American Independent Party candidate, who got almost 14 percent of the vote in 1968, and Ross Perot, the Reform Party candidate, who got about 19 percent in 1992.

20 Through various incarnations, alliances, and mergers, this is the Liberals, the Social Democrats, and now the Liberal Democrats. The party was almost wiped out in the 2015 British general election.

21 However, in the 2013 German elections the Free Democrats failed to win seats in the Bundestag for the first time since the party’s founding after World War II.

governments are the rule (table 1). So perhaps there is a relationship between the number of parties and the likelihood of polarization—the more parties, the less polarization. Alternatively, a proliferation of parties leads to depolarization. Interestingly, however, a long-standing argument in the comparative politics literature is that the more parties in a country, the *more* polarized it will be.²² Recent experience seems at least partially inconsistent with this generalization. Temporally, as the number of contending parties expanded in European countries, they became less polarized. And in the cross-section, the greater number of parties in European countries seems to be associated with less polarization than in the two-party United States. Clearly we need some serious thinking about the mechanism(s) that might produce a relationship—positive or negative—between the number of parties and the degree of polarization. The present state of research does not support generalizations.

Party Convergence and the Rise of Far-Right Parties in Europe

Some researchers suggest the existence of a link between the contemporary convergence of major parties and the rise of “far right” (i.e., anti-immigrant) parties in Europe.²³ The far-right parties came to prominence in many countries in the early to mid-1980s when the process of party convergence was beginning. In a number of countries, they now play a significant role in elections. Marine Le Pen’s National Front is the third largest party in France, and UKIP in Britain received almost 13 percent of the popular vote in the 2015 elections. In April 2016, an anti-immigrant Freedom Party won the first round of the presidential election in Austria with more than one-third of the vote, then lost the runoff by less than 1 percent.²⁴ Table 1 lists a sample of such parties in Western European democracies. Adams, De Vries, and Leiter note that subsequent to their analysis Dutch elites and voters began to polarize on a new issue: immigration. They suggest that convergence on the old Left-Right cleavage encouraged political entrepreneurs to exploit new cleavage lines. More anecdotal reports cite the move to the center by leftist parties in a time of economic difficulty, leaving the hard-pressed working class vulnerable to appeals by anti-immigrant politicians.²⁵

22 Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 316–317.

23 The terminology is a bit confusing for Americans since some of these parties (e.g., the National Front in France) offer economic policies that are clearly left-wing in the American context. There is historical precedent in the United States, however. Populist parties often combined racist and xenophobic appeals with attacks on economic elites—railroad corporations, the trusts, Wall Street banks, and so on. One can hear an echo in the rhetoric of Donald Trump.

24 Zack Beauchamp, “A Party Founded by Nazis Just Lost the Austrian Election—Barely,” *Vox*, May 23, 2016, www.vox.com/2016/5/23/11745038/austrian-election-2016-results-freedom-party. The Austrian Supreme Court has ordered a do-over because of election irregularities.

25 Steven Erlanger, “As Europe’s Political Landscape Shifts, Two-Party System Fades,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/04/08/world/europe/as-european-voting-fragments-days-of-single-party-rule-fade.html.



Table 1. Recent Vote for Right Wing Populist Parties in Western European Democracies

Party	Vote*
Swiss People's Party	26.6%
Freedom Party of Austria	20.5
New Flemish Alliance	20.3
Progress Party (Norway)	16.3
National Front (France)	13.6
Sweden Democrats	12.9
United Kingdom Independence Party	12.6
Danish People's Party	12.3
Party for Freedom (Netherlands)	10.1

*Popular vote in most recent national election

Source:

Aisch, Gregor; Pearce, Adam; Rousseau, Bryant. "How Far Is Europe Swinging to the Right?" *New York Times*, July 5, 2016. <http://valgresultat.no/?type=st&år=2013>

puzzling. The smaller the policy space to the right of the most right-wing mainstream party, the *greater* the support for far-right parties. And the larger the distance between the mainstream parties, the *greater* the support for far-right parties.²⁷ As the authors note, there are arguments in the comparative literature for why each of these variables might increase or decrease support for the far Right. It is impossible for a study like this to sort them out; it can only identify net effects.²⁸

There are some careful academic studies of the rise of such right-wing populist parties, but to date they do not yield a clear picture. On the one hand an extensive statistical analysis of far-right voting in sixteen Western European countries in the 1990s found no relationship between support for such parties and the amount of policy "space" left open by the positioning of the mainstream parties.²⁶ The data were from elections in 1994–97, however, so the study was limited in what it could say about the dynamics of far-right party support in more recent decades. A subsequent study of seven continental European countries from 1984 to 2001 reports that support for right-wing populist parties decreases with the proportionality of the electoral system—the more proportional the system, the lower the support. Other findings are somewhat

26 Marcel Lubbers, Merove Gijssberts, and Peer Scheepers, "Extreme Right-wing Voting in Western Europe," *European Journal of Political Research* 41, no. 3 (May 2002): 345–378.

27 Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Norway. Kai Arzheimer and Elisabeth Carter, "Political Opportunity Structures and Right-wing Extremist Party Success," *European Journal of Political Research* 45, no. 3 (May 2006): 419–443.

28 For example, some scholars argue that the more centrist the position taken by the more right-wing of the mainstream parties the larger the policy space left open for a far-right party to exploit. Mark Kayser and Arndt Leininger, "A Far-Right Party Just Won Seats in Three German State Parliaments. Here's Why," *Washington Post*, March 22, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/22/a-far-right-party-just-won-seats-in-three-german-state-parliaments-heres-why/. Other scholars suggest that the more extreme the position taken by the more right-wing mainstream party the less extreme and more legitimate the far-right party's position looks. If both factors are roughly as important (or neither is important), there will be no statistical relationship between the size of the open policy space and the appearance of far-right parties. Herbert Kitschelt and A. J. McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995). Cf. Piero Ignazi, "The Crisis of Parties and the Rise of New Political Parties," *Party Politics* 2 (1996): 549–566.

Arim Abedi studied the relationships between party system characteristics and support for anti-establishment parties of all ideological stripes.²⁹ His analysis covered sixteen European countries over the periods 1945–74 and 1982–93. He found that convergence of the main establishment parties is associated with support for anti-establishment parties both across countries at a single point in time and—more weakly—within countries over time. Overall polarization of the party system adds to the effect when the establishment parties are close together.

Despite my hopes, this foray into the comparative literature does not suggest any clear lessons for analyses of party polarization in the United States. While scholars have advanced a number of hypotheses about the relationships among party polarization, the proportionality of the electoral system, and the (related) number and types of parties, the findings of empirical analyses to date yield an unclear picture. As Lorenzo De Sio notes, current developments in Western democracies challenge “existing theories of party competition—as none of the existing theoretical frameworks is able to convincingly describe and explain the competitive dynamics of these recent years.”³⁰

There is at least one positive take-away from the experiences of European democracies, however. If despite their variety of electoral systems and governmental structures, all their parties were polarizing like those in the United States, it would suggest the operation of large-scale forces that affect all countries. This in turn would imply that there is little possibility of decreasing party polarization in the United States. But the fact that the major parties in other countries are following a different path—depolarizing, rather than polarizing—indicates that polarization in the United States is more contingent and perhaps not an inevitable feature of politics in the contemporary world.

Postscript: The Resurgence of Populism—Trump, Brexit, and ?

As noted in the previous section, social science research generally trails real world developments, a source of frustration for those caught up in those developments. After a time research can shed light on unfolding events but often not soon enough to help people who are dealing with them. Probably the most important political development of the past year is the resurgence of populism in the electorates of Western democracies. Scholars define the term somewhat differently,³¹ and there are myriad differences in the experiences of countries, but there is no denying the similarities between the success of the Trump candidacy in the United States and the growing strength of nationalist, anti-immigrant

29 Arim Abedi, “Challenges to Established Parties: The Effects of Party System Features on the Electoral Fortunes of Anti-Political-Establishment Parties,” *European Journal of Political Research* 41, no. 4 (June 2002): 551–583.

30 Leonard De Sio, *The Return of Politics* (forthcoming). Provide publisher if known.

31 Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).



parties in Britain, France, Germany, Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands, and other Western democracies. Brexit in the United Kingdom and the threat of exits from the European Union by elements in Spain, Italy, and other countries are another manifestation of this rising populist tide.

Research thus far has described the kinds of people most receptive to populist appeals. Surveys indicate that they tend to be older and male, natives rather than newcomers (i.e., white in the United States, ethnic German and French, etc., in Europe), and have lower educational levels. Contextually, populist appeals seem stronger in areas populated by people with such characteristics, especially where economic growth is slow. Interestingly, Trump supporters are not themselves especially disadvantaged economically, but they are pessimistic about their economic futures and those of their children. For example, a Polimetrix panel survey found that Trump supporters report more anger about political developments than non-supporters, and anger in turn correlates with economic pessimism.

Commentaries on the populist revival attribute it to various causal factors. Those who are least sympathetic see it largely as a manifestation of widespread racism and xenophobia.³² White men, particularly those with less education and skills that are not in demand in the new economy, express their frustration by lashing out at newer arrivals of different skin color and religions. As Hillary Clinton commented, “You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump’s supporters into what I call the ‘basket of deplorables.’ Right? The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it.”³³ More than a few commentators thought that she was being generous in attributing this motivation to only half of Trump’s supporters.³⁴ For political elites on both the left and right this view has the considerable merit of placing the blame for the rise of a purportedly anti-democratic movement on the moral failings of the great unwashed, while leaving the more enlightened layers of society blameless.

Certainly, it would be naïve to deny that there is a significant element of racial resentment in the populist revival. But the important question is: How much? There seems little doubt

32 E.g., Sanford Schram, “It’s Racism, Stupid: The Populist Challenge Going Forward,” Public Seminar, August 16, 2016, www.publicseminar.org/2016/08/its-racism-stupid-the-populist-challenge-going-forward/.

33 Dan Balz, “Clinton’s ‘deplorables’ remark sums up a deplorable election season,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/clintons-deplorables-remark-sums-up-a-deplorable-election-season/2016/09/10/78977694-777b-11e6-be4f-3f42f2e5a49e_story.html.

34 Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Hillary Clinton Was Politically Incorrect, but She Wasn’t Wrong About Trump’s Supporters,” *The Atlantic*, September 10, 2016, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/basket-of-deplorables/499493/; Janelle Bouie, “Do Half of Trump’s Supporters Really Belong in a ‘Basket of Deplorables’?” *Slate*, September 11, 2016, www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2016/09/trump_s_basket_of_deplorables_hillary_clinton_was_right.html.

that in continental Europe the arrival of people of different color and religions has fanned the populist flames; but in England, home of UKIP and Brexit, much of the resentment focuses on Poles and other Eastern Europeans who are both white and Christian. And in the United States, the Sanders branch of the populist tendency stands in contrast to the Trump branch. Sanders supporters were more heavily male, but not less well-educated, than Clinton supporters, and while charges of sexism were common, no one to my knowledge labeled the Sandernistas as racists.

Those who are more sympathetic to the populist resurgence view it as in significant part a reflection of the failure of elites.³⁵ “The list is familiar to you by now: 9/11. Iraq. Katrina. Congressional corruption. Financial meltdown. Bank bailouts. Failed stimulus. A health care mess. Stagnant wages. Rising distrust. Diminished hopes. 16 years of promises from Republicans and Democrats alike that failed to live up to what people wanted. This distrust was earned.”³⁶ All over the Western world economic experts have failed to develop policies that pull their countries out of the Great Recession. Historically, political upheaval travels with economic stagnation.³⁷ In the United States, we can add a decade and a half of wars that consume lives and resources and appear to have no end. Add the inexcusable bailouts of the financial sector and it is plausible to argue that the resurgence of populism in the United States reflects a stew of resentment of the “establishment.”³⁸ There is something for almost all Americans to resent—politicians and plutocrats, public and private sector bureaucracies, cultural elites and financial elites, and, of course, the media.

Some European scholars take a similar position about developments in their countries: “These parties and their voters should not, then, be labelled as arrogant insiders attacking downtrodden outsiders like immigrants, workers, and minorities. Instead, the right-wingers

35 William A. Galston, “The Populist Revolt Against Failure,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-populist-revolt-against-failure-1472598368>.

36 Ben Domenech, “Blame the Elites for the Trump Phenomenon,” *The Federalist*, September 14, 2016, <http://thefederalist.com/2016/09/14/blame-the-elites-for-the-trump-phenomenon/>.

37 Dalibor Rohac, “It’s Still the Economy Stupid,” *Foreign Policy*, September 16, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/16/its-still-the-economy-stupid-populism-trump-syriza/>; John B. Judis, “All the Rage,” *New Republic*, September 19, 2016, https://newrepublic.com/article/136327/all-rage-sanders-trump-populism?utm_source=New+Republic&utm_campaign=b1e08addcd-Daily_Newsletter_9_19_169_19_2016&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c4ad0aba7e-b1e08addcd-59578357.

38 Not just in the United States, of course. As Nigel Farage, former leader of UKIP, commented about Brexit, “It was the first victory against an international political elite who have led us into an endless series of foreign wars and seen politics effectively purchased by the big banks and the multinationals.” Nigel Farage, “Donald Trump calls himself ‘Mr. Brexit.’ Here’s why he’s right,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/09/06/nigel-farage-donald-trump-calls-himself-mr-brexitheres-why-hes-right/?utm_term=.c047d0c0835c.



are more justly portrayed as outsiders and underdogs, raising their anger and frustration against the insiders: the media elite and the leftists and the artists.”³⁹

Most social scientists fall into a middle category of “it’s complicated.” No doubt there is some validity in both of the two preceding explanations. If world economies were growing at a rate of 4 percent per year, I very much doubt that the political conversation would take the form it currently does. We tend to talk about prejudice as a fixed characteristic of individuals, but it likely varies somewhat with people’s satisfaction with their own lives. In good times, they are less prejudiced and more tolerant. In bad times, they grow naturally frustrated and are more likely to blame others for their difficulties. Unfortunately, few economists are predicting a return of widespread prosperity anytime soon. Thus, even if Trump loses badly, the populist resurgence is unlikely to disappear. And, if anything, it is still rising in Europe. I will revisit this subject in the post-election essay.

39 Goran Adamson, *Populist Parties and the Failure of the Political Elites* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016), www.peterlang.com/view/9783653966107/xhtml/hints.xhtml.

Essay Series

An Era of Tenuous Majorities: A Historical Context

Has the American Public Polarized?

The Political Parties Have Sorted

Party Sorting and Democratic Politics

The Temptation to Overreach

Independents: The Marginal Members of an Electoral Majority

The (Re)Nationalization of Congressional Elections

Is the US Experience Exceptional?

A Historical Perspective

Post-Election



The publisher has made this work available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial license 3.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0>.

Hoover Institution Press assumes no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Copyright © 2016 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University



About the Author



MORRIS P. FIORINA

Morris Fiorina is the Wendt Family Professor of Political Science at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. For more than four decades he has written on American politics with particular emphasis on elections and public opinion. Fiorina has written or edited twelve books and more than 100 articles, served as chairman of the Board of the American National Election Studies, and received the Warren E. Miller Career Achievement Award from the American Political Science Association Section on Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior. His widely noted book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (with Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope) is thought to have influenced then Illinois state senator Barack Obama's keynote speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention ("We coach Little League in the blue states, and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states").

Series Overview

In contrast to most of modern American political history, partisan control of our national elective institutions has been unusually tenuous during the past several decades. This essay series argues that the ideologically sorted parties that contest elections today face strong internal pressures to overreach, by which I mean emphasizing issues and advocating positions strongly supported by the party base but which cause the marginal members of their electoral coalitions to defect. Thus, electoral losses predictably follow electoral victories. Institutional control is fleeting.

The first group of essays describes the contemporary American electorate. Despite myriad claims to the contrary, the data show that the electorate is no more polarized now than it was in the later decades of the twentieth century. What has happened is that the parties have sorted so that each party is more homogeneous than in the twentieth century; liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats have largely passed from the political scene. The muddled middle is as large as ever but has no home in either party. The growth in the proportion of self-identified independents may be a reflection of the limited appeal of today's sorted parties.

The second group of essays develops the overreach argument, discusses the role of independents as the marginal members of an electoral majority, and explains how party sorting produces less split-ticket voting. Rather than most voters being more set in their partisan allegiances than a generation ago, they may simply have less reason to split their tickets when almost all Democratic candidates are liberals and all Republican candidates are conservatives.

The third group of essays embeds contemporary American politics in two other contexts. First, in a comparative context, developments in the European democracies are the mirror image of those in the United States: the major European parties have depolarized or de-sorted or both, whereas their national electorates show little change. The rise of anti-immigrant parties may have some as yet not well-understood role in these developments. Second, in a historical context, the instability of American majorities today resembles that of the late nineteenth century, when similar significant social and economic changes were occurring.

A final postelection essay will wrap up the series.

These essays naturally draw on the work of many people who have contributed to a very active research program. I thank colleagues John Aldrich, Douglas Ahler, Paul Beck, Bruce Cain, James Campbell, Shanto Iyengar, Matthew Levendusky, Sandy Maisel, Paul Sniderman, and Guarav Sood, whose questions forced me to sharpen various arguments; and David Brady in particular for almost daily conversations about the matters covered in the posts that follow.