

Can the Centre Hold?

Article by Sanna Salo

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The Great Financial Crisis exposed divisions that went on to destroy the political centre in the decade that followed. The established parties crumbled and the far right, the radical left, and the Greens grew in their place. From Brexit to climate change, new issues cut across old divides. But how did they emerge? Are new fault lines created by parties or do they speak to deeper social divides? At a time when a coronavirus-induced economic shock promises to reshape politics once more, Sanna Salo explains how the centre ground is made.

European politics is fracturing. In a process of party-system fragmentation, the large centre-left and -right parties are losing support and the fringes – left, green, and the radical right – gain. This is true both for EU politics, as witnessed in the 2019 European parliament elections, as well as for national political systems.

These changes have led many to conclude that mainstream politics is broken, liberal democracy is waning and a new era of either right-wing authoritarianism or green-left cosmopolitanism is about to take hold. Tradition parties of government, such as the Conservatives and the Social Democrats, have a hard time responding. On immigration, identity politics, and climate change, their constituencies are split and their decision-making is stuck.

Over the last two decades, the Social Democrats have lost 8.1 per cent of their support in Sweden, 5.2 in Finland, 16.4 in France, and a full 20.4 per cent in Germany. Similar trends can be observed for moderate right-wing parties. The radical right has gained most as a result. In Sweden and Finland, the radical-right Sweden Democrats and the Finns Party sit in the polls at approximately 20 per cent of support. In Finland, the Finns Party was in government between 2015 and 2019. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany won over 12 per cent of the vote in the 2017 Bundestag elections and has scored close to 30 per cent in some federal state elections. At the other end of the spectrum, the Greens are in government coalitions in Sweden, Finland, and Austria, and support for the German Greens stands at around 20 per cent, making their entrance into a future government entirely possible.

The same trends were also clearly visible in the 2019 European Parliament elections. The two centrist blocs, the European People's Party and the Socialists and Democrats, failed to reach majority for the first time, while radical right-wing parties and the Greens marched forward.

This transformation of politics has led to various hypotheses about what might be going on. Why are the Greens and the radical right gaining? Has the socio-economic left-right cleavage lost prominence to the socio-cultural axis that runs between the liberal and the authoritarian poles? Have socio-economic issues become superfluous to voting choice?

Cleavages, conflict and parties

In his recent book, *The Reshaping of West European Party Politics: Agenda-Setting and Party Competition in Comparative Perspective*, Christoffer Green-Pedersen of Aarhus University argues that politics has become issue-based rather than class-based. According to this account, political agendas are now shaped by the strategic interactions of parties, not class interests and identities. This is a top-down model of party competition. The

bottom-up view sees groups of citizens, united by common interests, as the social basis of parties and their programmes. This view, also known the “cleavage theory” of political competition, considers the content of party politics as a reflection of underlying social conflicts. Societal conflicts, such as that between labour and capital or between urban centres and rural peripheries, are articulated through political parties. Importantly, such societal divisions are never just about common interests, but also about identity and shared experience. “Worker” is an identity as well as a place in the labour market.

The new issues cross-cut traditional lines.

Yet when “new” political issues dominate the political agenda, it is less clear which coalitions of voters back up these issues. What is, for example, the political coalition behind the climate issue? In specific contexts, such a coalition may be clearly detectable – think about the *gilets jaunes* and the fuel tax – but, generally, the coalitions are latent rather than manifest. The new issues cross-cut traditional lines. Observers such as Green-Pedersen have concluded that contemporary politics is about temporary coalitions mobilising around single issues, with no lasting basis in society. Yet others have convincingly argued that cleavages are not static, and social conflicts may be latent and hard to recognise. In other words, politics may seemingly revolve around single, separate issues, but fundamentally those issues are manifestations of underlying societal conflict.

Take Brexit as an example of political populism. At first, it is hard to see any clear political coalition behind it. But the “politics of place” certainly weighed heavily in the process. Brexit reactivated the centre-periphery cleavage, one of the core lines in Western democracies. The “centre” and “periphery” can, in turn, be articulated in cultural or material terms. In the first sense, Brexit is a result of culture wars between the locally affiliated supporters of traditional values, residing in Britain’s more remote areas, and cosmopolitan, liberal urban dwellers. But, as said, location in the socio-structural space is as much about identity as it is about material interests. Transport connections in Northern England have suffered from systematic underinvestment, cutting off people residing in the small and middle-sized, declining towns that voted for Brexit.

Conflicts might be blurry and new, but this does not mean they are not there. Austerity and record numbers of migrants may have stirred things up, but they are not the underlying reasons for the new politics we observe.

The GAN-TAN axis

The Greens and the radical right parties are the carriers of these new conflicts.

They primarily mobilise their support away from traditional left-right issues, such as taxation, welfare, and social security. These forces are at opposite poles of the “GAN-TAN axis”. The concept GAL-TAN refers to “green-alternative-liberal” versus “traditional-authoritarian-nationalist”. The Greens, together with some left-wing parties, occupy the “GAL” pole, whereas the radical right, as well as the right-wing fringes of conservative parties, occupy the “TAN” end. These groups thus hold starkly different views on issues such as climate and immigration – just think of Donald Trump’s attacks on climate activist Greta Thunberg at the 2020 Davos Economic Forum.

The Greens and the radical right mobilise the people who have benefited from or suffered as a result of globalisation and automation. The Greens draw support from educated upper-middle class city dwellers, for whom global mobility is not a threat but an opportunity. The radical right supporters are those condescendingly labelled the “left-behinds” or, as Hillary Clinton infamously put it, the “deplorables”. They are mostly working-class, residents of rural or semi-rural areas, more men than women, conservative in their value orientation. They have not seen economic or cultural globalisation benefit them in any way and, therefore, are against it.

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The existence of “left-behinds” is a failure of incumbent policymakers from the centrist parties to shelter citizens from globalisation and modernisation. The outsourcing of production, a sense of insecurity caused by mass migration, environmental degradation – there is nothing inevitable about these processes. Presenting them as such depoliticises them and leaves space for new political challengers.

Political parties must then be able to articulate even latent societal conflicts, translate them into the political process, and eventually answer them through policies. This is where the top-down approach to party competition comes in. The strategic competition between parties affects the way new, latent conflicts are articulated. As political scientists [Liesbet Hooghe](#) and [Gary Marks](#) put it, “political parties are actors, not subjects, in the formation of social divisions”. The radical right has, for example, often chosen to talk about migration as an issue of cultural identity and law and order. But that is not the only interpretation available. Political competition between parties is also about labelling, not only identifying conflicts.

A separate question is why certain conflict lines have become central and others have faded to the background. In his book, Green-Pedersen finds that income tax levels, a classic left-right issue, have declined in salience, while the socio-cultural “GAL-TAN” issues of identity and borders have gained prominence.

One obvious response is that radical right-wing parties have politicised immigration and national identity, as the Greens have the environmental issue. Another answer is that the issues that have fallen down the agenda have been de-politicised to the point that there is nothing to debate about. If “there is no alternative” economic policy, then why discuss it at all?

Depoliticising the economic

The narrowing space for national policymakers, especially on economic matters, became drastically visible to European voters in the last financial and Eurozone crisis. European integration has transferred power to the European level policymakers. Over the course of the previous crisis, the Eurozone rulebook for macroeconomic management was strengthened to tie the hands of domestic policymakers on the scope for redistribution even further.

The Eurozone crisis crystallised a long-term shift in the balance of power between markets and states. In the face of collapsing banks, states found they had little choice but to run to the rescue with taxpayers’ money. Some of the de-politicisation of economic policymaking is also built into the Western European welfare states, as pre-existing entitlements eat most of the budgetary cake and leave little space for discretionary spending. Finally, decades of neoliberalism convinced policymakers that interventions in the economy and, consequently, in people’s livelihoods, are bad. Policymakers have therefore turned to governing by “doing, and promising, less policy rather than more”.

As mainstream left-and right-wing parties converged around a neoliberal centre, voters could no longer tell the difference.

In the heyday of European welfare state building, parties competed by promising constant expansions of public goods. Contemporary mainstream parties, by contrast, have bought the idea that markets ought to be left to themselves. As mainstream left-and right-wing parties converged around a neoliberal centre, voters could no longer tell the difference.

None of this means that redistribution, taxation or welfare no longer are subject of – at times heated – political debate. It just means that political alternatives in these areas have become less pronounced. This has left voters longing for alternatives and created space for parties that mobilise on other issues.

Beyond polarisation

The alternative to explaining the rise of fringe parties through single-issue success is to highlight the inaction of mainstream parties. Recent research in Sweden has demonstrated that the radical right-wing Sweden Democrats are particularly popular among groups that have lost out economically in the past two decades and that their support levels are not spatially connected to high incoming migration. The Swedish Democrats have channelled the socio-economic discontent into anti-immigration sentiment.

The task for progressive and moderate forces is to re-package that message such that social problems can be recognised for what they are. For the Greens – as carriers of the crucial and pressing climate question – this means a responsibility to consider those voters that may not support them but who will be affected by their policies. Climate mitigation measures need to be weighed by their social impact and the consequences of urban policies need to be considered from the perspectives of other areas. Parties have to see beyond their particular electorates to find middle ground with those that today represent their adversaries. The voters of the radical right voters can no longer be demonised and other forces should recognise, with humility, the issues that have provoked their protest. That way the centre can, once more, hold.



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