

# EUROPE'S PARTY POLITICS: LIBERAL, ILLIBERAL, OR QUASI-LIBERAL?

For a time, post-war European politics was dominated by the liberal type of party. These broadly liberal parties were who originally envisaged the idea of a united Europe and subsequently carried the torch for the advancement of open society in a progressively integrated Europe under rule of law.

1/5

Introduction



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**OVER MANY DECADES**, Europe's party systems operated as liberal political cartels in which the major parties competed for power against each other, largely unchallenged by other party types. Fast forward to the present day, and the talk around town is about the decline of the formerly established liberal parties, the proliferation of new populist ones, and, ominously enough, the rise of various other so-called anti-system parties – leading to democratic backsliding and, potentially, the disintegration of the European Union. Which part of this narrative corresponds to empirical reality, and which is just hype and headlines? More to the point: What is the current picture of Europe's party politics? And what is the outlook for the future at EU level? When the subject is today's political parties, it makes sense to tell their stories in retrospect. A good starting point is the year 1990, when the mood in Europe was jubilant. The Berlin Wall had already been pulled down and Francis Fukuyama declared the “unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism”; he even dared proclaim “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”. Soon, the Soviet Union would also fall apart, and Europe's liberals seemed confident that their ideas were unassailable.

**Liberal parties** share three interrelated characteristics. The first is their acknowledgement that any open democratic society is unavoidably

split along many, often crosscutting, divisions that generate conflict. Liberal parties' second common characteristic is their understanding of the need to behave moderately, seek consensus, and prefer positive-sum outcomes. This need is best met via liberal parties' third characteristic, which is their adherence to safeguards for minority rights and the rule of law, as expressed primarily in written constitutions. In addition to these three core characteristics, the vast majority of Europe's post-war liberal parties have been in favour of an “ever closer union,” which included the abolition of tariff barriers in Europe, the adoption of a common currency, the easing of border controls under the Schengen Agreement, and above all, the accession of several formerly communist states into the EU.

By 1990, liberal parties held sway in most of Europe. Whether in their centre-right Christian Democratic variant or the centre-left Social Democratic one, and whether singlehandedly, in coalition with smaller centrist parties, or even forming “grand coalitions” between them, liberal parties ruled Europe nearly unchallenged. In Greece, a strong populist party had emerged and won office back in 1981, but Greece was too far removed from where the liberal heart of Europe beat and too small to cause general concern. Two other challengers of the established liberal order received more attention. The first was France's National

Front (FN) which, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 1988 presidential election, won an unprecedented 14.4% of the vote and thus consolidated its position in French politics. The second challenger was the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) which, under the leadership of Jörg Haider, received a hefty 16.6% of the vote in the 1990 national elections. The electoral successes of the FN and FPÖ did in fact ruffle the feathers of the old liberal parties but, again, weren't those two merely isolated cases serving to simply emphasize liberal predominance?

That was a widespread but mistaken assumption. Meanwhile, three types of challenger parties were already on the rise or about to emerge across Europe in the coming years and decades: populist, nativist, and nationalist ones.

**Populist parties** have been a novelty for liberal Europe since they first entered the political picture only a few decades ago. They combine allegiance to electoral democracy with disregard for modern liberal institutions. Populism can be conceptualized neatly and defined minimally as *democratic illiberalism* – a kind of rebuttal to contemporary liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup> In sharp contrast to their liberal opponents, populist parties view society as being divided between only two social groups: an organic majority of ordinary people on one side and, on the opposing side, one or more elite groups. Such parties, accordingly, generate – and thrive on – political polarization, which in turn justifies their pursuit of majoritarianism at the expense of liberal institutionalism.

In the early 1990s, Italy's party system collapsed with a bang. Out went the established liberal, yet badly tarnished, Christian Democratic and Socialist parties. In came a new populist force, Forza Italy, led by media magnate Silvio Berlusconi. After first winning power in the 1994 general elections, he formed successive governments and ruled Italy for

a total of nine years, thus becoming the longest serving prime minister in post-war Italy. By then, however, liberalism was not the only game in town, and populism began spreading out from the South to Europe's formerly communist nations. In 2010, right-wing populist Viktor Orbán rose to power in Hungary and, in 2015, rightist Lech Kaczyński and his populist party also emerged as the dominant force in Poland. During the same tumultuous era, populism made a new appearance in crisis-ridden southern European nations. In Greece, left populist SYRIZA won a majority of votes in the general election of 2015 and promptly formed a coalition government with the right populist party of Independent Greeks (or ANEL). Their populist tandem would enjoy a four-year-long ride in government. In Spain, too, leftist populist party Podemos rose mainly due to the economic crisis and social disenchantment of the early 2010s. Unlike its Greek counterpart, though, Podemos did not win in elections. It did, however, succeed in entering a liberal party dominated coalition government as a junior partner.

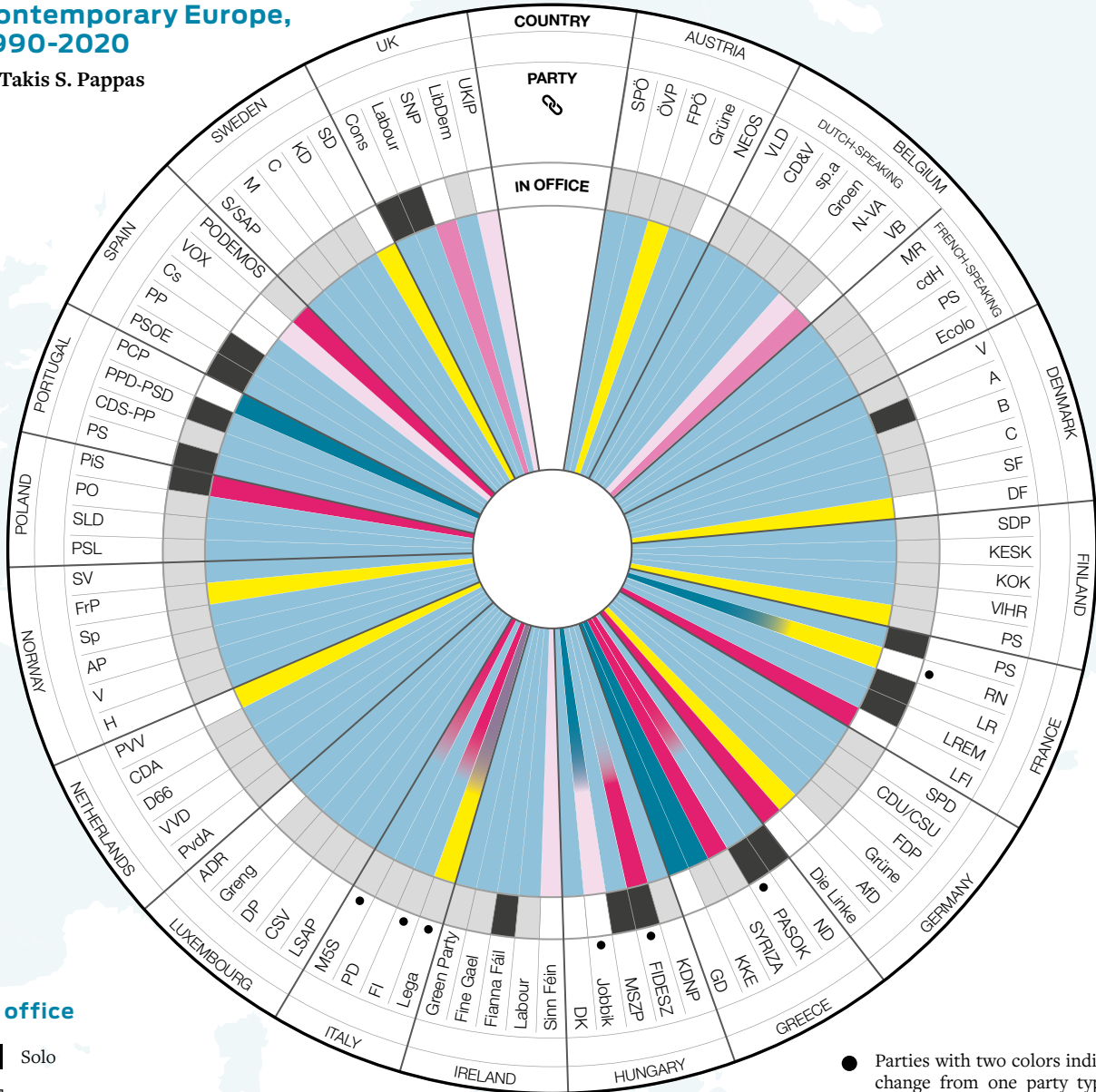
The second challenger to establishment post-war liberalism, which rose during the 1990s and with renewed vigour over the course of the 2000s, is a class of parties that, for lack of a better term, are known as **nativist parties**. They have grown strongest in Europe's wealthiest and most socially diverse but also culturally homogenous and politically liberal nations. Unlike populists, nativists do not take issue with established liberal constitutions; their core consists of strong social xenophobia and, relatedly, economic chauvinism.<sup>2</sup> Nativist parties typically advocate policies of protecting the interests of native-born citizens against alien populations in addition to their general opposition to further European integration. And they are chauvinistic when it comes to protecting their nations' welfare regimes from being drained by

<sup>1</sup> For the original definition of populism as “democratic illiberalism,” see Takis S. Pappas, “Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Post-Communist Hungary,” *Government and Opposition* 49(1), January 2014: 1–23, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/populist-democracies-postauthoritarian-greece-and-postcommunist-hungary/C25A68B6B8AD01966AD8C3E6488E7BC7> (published online 19 July 2013).

<sup>2</sup> On the distinction between populists and nativists, see Takis S. Pappas, “The Specter Haunting Europe: Distinguishing Liberal Democracy's Challengers,” *Journal of Democracy* 27(4), October 2016: 22–36, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-specter-haunting-europe-distinguishing-liberal-democracies-challengers/>. For a recent policy report with a detailed analysis of Europe's nativist parties that have participated in coalition governments, see Takis S. Pappas and Dimitris Skleparis, “Populism and Nativism in Modern-Day Europe: An Assessment with Policy Recommendations”, *Populism and Civic Engagement (PaCE)* website, 31 January 2021, [http://popandce.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/PaCE\\_D1.2\\_Populism-and-nativism-in-modern-day-Europe.pdf](http://popandce.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/PaCE_D1.2_Populism-and-nativism-in-modern-day-Europe.pdf).

# A Typology of Parties in Contemporary Europe, 1990-2020

by Takis S. Pappas



### In office

- Solo
- Coalition partner
- Never

- Parties with two colors indicates change from one party type to another.
- Clicking on party names takes you to their official websites.

## Liberal

The majority of political parties in Europe. Both democratic and committed to liberal principles, they are distinguished by three characteristics: their acknowledgement that society is divided by multiple cleavages; the pursuit of political moderation and overlapping consensus; and their adherence to the rule of law and the protection of minority rights.

## Populist

A novel party type that developed in Europe after the mid-1970s in opposition to the liberal type. Democratic but illiberal, populists view society as being split between an integrated majority of ordinary people and elite minorities. It inevitably generates political polarization, which, in turn, justifies their pursuit of majoritarianism at the expense of liberal institutionalism.

## Nativist

Technically a subcategory of the liberal type, nativist parties advocate a policy of protecting the interests of native-born citizens against alien populations, in addition to their opposition to further European integration. They have risen strong in recent decades particularly in Europe's most wealthy and solidly liberal democracies.

## Nationalist

Another subcategory of the European liberal party type, their basic aim is to achieve their respective nation's full sovereignty vis-à-vis other nations or supranational organizations, most notably the EU. Most paradigmatic of this type are the parties which, in recent years, advocated Brexit and British unionism.

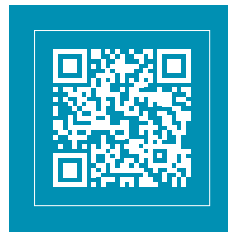
## Regionalist & Secessionist

These parties constitute specific subcategories of the nationalist party type. They campaign for either greater regional autonomy (i.e., regionalist parties) or full national independence (i.e., secessionist parties) from the centralist control of the nation state in which they belong.

## Antidemocratic

Found on either the extreme left or the extreme right of party systems, they participate in elections as typical "antisystem" forces seeking to delegitimize the normative foundations of parliamentary democracy and subvert its legal-institutional structures, often by use of violence.

immigrants or otherwise wasted on EU projects. In no way, however, do nativist parties oppose or aim to overthrow the liberal institutions that are firmly established in their respective societies; neither do they wish to have them replaced by illiberal ones. To put it most simply: nativist parties advocate an extra-conservative liberal democracy, *good only for their native citizens*. Their “liberalism” is definitely a different kind than that espoused by the post-war classical liberal parties.



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Another criterion that differentiates populist from nativist parties is the inability of the latter to win power by themselves. Europe's most important nativist parties currently are, in their respective countries' alphabetical order, Austria's FPÖ, the Danish People's Party (DF), the Finns (PS), France's National Rally (RN), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Lega in Italy, the Dutch Party of Freedom (PVV), Norway's Progress Party (FrP), and the Sweden Democrats (SD). Interestingly enough, none of the above parties has ever been able to win an electoral majority or win singlehandedly. Instead, nativists have so far been stuck in opposition or, at best, as junior partners in coalitions. Even when in office, their performance has been mostly hampered by bad leadership, inefficacy, and scandals. No wonder that, with the exception of the FrP, which enjoyed being part of a coalition government in Norway for over six years, no other nativist party can claim a sufficiently long term in office.

The third type of challenger party to have developed in the context of European party politics also includes liberal parties with a distinctly nationalist agenda. The ultimate aim of such single-issue **nationalist parties** is to achieve their respective nation's full sovereignty vis-à-vis other nations or supranational organizations, most notably the EU. The most prominent example of this type has been the UK Independence Party (UKIP), a vocal advocate of Britain “taking back control from Brussels”. The nationalist pull exerted by the UKIP contributed decisively to the 2016 referendum that eventually led to the UK's

withdrawal from the EU. The UKIP subsequently saw its voter share greatly decline, after which it adopted a more nativist, anti-immigration stance.

Three decades since 1990, it is time to begin making new sense of the contemporary landscape of European party politics. Based on the [infographic](#) on page 3, which shows at a glance the party types developed in several European countries over the last 30 years, the following question is raised: Given Europe's new landscape of party politics, what is the outlook for the future? By glancing at the infographic, the answer is: quite mixed. By looking at it closer and longer, though, one begins to see broad patterns emerging and large processes forming, as well as the likelihood of long-term outcomes becoming more conceivable.

Here are four **major takeaways**:

1. Liberal parties are still predominant in most of Europe, but their liberalism is currently found wanting. Through the years, post-war liberalism has been hollowed out, as modern-day liberal parties have heaped debacles caused by inefficient leaderships and inefficacious policies, not to mention their increasing need to strike deals with their (mostly unsavoury) nativist kin to patch up coalition governments. Along the way, Europe's liberal parties have adopted several of the policies originally espoused by nativist and nationalist parties, especially cutting immigration and restricting citizenship rights.
2. Populist parties have proliferated in Europe in recent decades, but it seems that, at least for the time being, their growth has reached a plateau. Three conclusions follow: Firstly, populist parties tend to flourish more in Europe's southern and eastern lands. Secondly, populist success is highly correlated to individual agency, which in this case presents itself in the form of extraordinary charismatic leadership. Thirdly, as difficult as it is for populists to gain power, removing them from it is even more difficult. Once in office, populists display significant staying power.
3. Nativist parties have grown prominently, especially in Europe's western and northern nations,



whose party systems are fragmented (i.e., there are many parties, none of which approaches the absolute majority point). In such systems, nativists enjoy two great potentialities – one, rendering themselves available as coalition partners and, two, intimidating their liberal opponents into adopting anti-immigration or anti-EU policies – lest they lose votes to the nativist parties. Either way, Europe’s nativist parties work on diluting classical post-war liberalism while at the same time steering liberal parties towards extra-conservative positions.

4. Finally, nationalist parties have been a relative rarity at EU level, at least in their pure anti-federalist and self-determining sovereigntist form. After Brexit, other European nationalisms came to a standstill. But there is no guarantee against a resurgence of nationalism or nationalist parties in the future under new circumstances: including, but not restricted to, Europe-wide economic or political crises, international power reshufflings, the uncertainties of a post-pandemic world or, more simply, the emergence of charismatic leaders with an alluring nationalist message. ■

5/5 Europe's party politics: liberal, illiberal, or quasi-liberal?

## Authors' Bio

**Takis S. Pappas (Ph.D., Yale)** is a political researcher and analyst currently working at the University of Helsinki and known for his original work on populism, the future of liberalism, parties, and party systems. Besides numerous other publications, he has authored five books, the most recent of which is *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (Oxford 2019). He is a regular op-ed writer in Greece’s major newspaper, *Kathimerini*, and maintains the blog [www.pappaspopulism.com](http://www.pappaspopulism.com). He lives in Brussels, Belgium, and Athens, Greece.

### About ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 47 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.



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