Culture Wars

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How to stabilise liberal democracies and regain ground for the centre–right parties

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Summary

In Western democracies the core principles of an open society are under threat from political polarisation, (self-)censorship and a decline in the opportunities for open public discourse. It is mainly centrist parties, particularly conservative–liberal and Christian Democratic ones, that have been hit by these deformations. The paper will analyse the genesis and characteristics of the current public debates on these issues and develop ideas from a conservative–liberal perspective on strengthening the political and ideological position of centre–right parties. It argues that it is not, first and foremost, the debates and divisions surrounding values in modern societies which pose the biggest challenge for modern democracies and democratic parties. Rather, it is the deliberate, culturally induced assault on free and rational public discourse that is damaging the core mechanism required for a functioning pluralistic society and multi-party system.

Keywords Conservativism – Liberal democracy – Political parties – Christian Democracy – Political culture – Open society

Introduction

Throughout their history, conservative–liberal and Christian Democratic parties[1] have always been at the forefront of defending an open society.[2] Members of these political movements have shared various principles even if there have been differences in the philosophical reasoning. Foremost among these principles have been a strong belief in the openness of the future, the limits of human knowledge and a socially responsible individualism/personalism,[3] as well as an opposition to the idea of the limitless transformability of humankind. In short, these movements have shared a belief in the dignity of the human person.[4]

The success of Western democracies after the Second World War was inextricably linked to the rise of a new type of political party: the 'people's parties'.[5] These parties were able to integrate a wide range of formerly separate political movements, and this has contributed significantly to unprecedented political stability, wealth creation and peace in (Western) Europe. Centrist political parties dominated the political arena for decades and largely prevented the polarisation of the electorate and the emergence of radical left- and right-wing parties. Admittedly, the external existential threat posed by global Communist movements helped to strengthen the democratic consensus.

However, since the 1980s and mainly in the US, we have observed a process of societal polarisation 'whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "us" versus "them".'[6] This development has impacted the existing party systems in Western democracies in different ways, depending on the specific constitutional and

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[1] For the sake of brevity, the term 'conservative–liberal' will be used to include Christian Democratic parties.

[2] For a discussion of the philosophical foundations of an open society, see K. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[3] The conceptual differences between classical liberalism and Christian Democracy cannot be discussed in detail here. See C. I. Accetti, *What is Christian Democracy?: Politics, Religion and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[4] On the history of conservative–liberal and Christian-Democratic parties in the twentieth century, see J. W. Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); and Accetti, *What is Christian Democracy?*

[5] On the European People's Party and its member parties, see T. Jansen, and S Van Hecke, *At Europe's Service: The Origins and Evolution of the European People's Party* (Berlin-Heidelberg: Springer, 2011).

[6] J. McCoy, T. Rahman and M. Somer, 'Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities', *American Behavioral Scientist* 62/1 (2018), 16.

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electoral systems involved. In some cases two- or three-party systems have fragmented into a multitude of smaller parties. In others an ideological polarisation has arisen within existing parties, or populist–extremist parties have emerged on both the left and the right. And in still others, movements[7] have been created as an alternative to the existing party-dominated system.

Changes in the economic and demographic system, but also factors within the party system, have contributed to these developments.[8] But for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of what and why they have taken place, one has to tap *into the broader cultural context* as changes there have preceded those in the political and party system. The thesis of this paper is the following:

> *Massive cultural divisions in Western societies—what some have called 'culture wars'—have led to a detrimental polarisation of societies and politics. As a result, the space for free, rational and inclusive public discourse—the core mechanism of and requirement for a function-ing pluralistic society and multi-party system—has been massively damaged. Political parties of the centre–right (and centre–left) are critical stabilising factors in liberal democracies. And it is they that have been most affected by this development.*

In the author's opinion, it is not the debate on values per se which lies at the heart of the problem. Fundamental values such as human rights and democracy[9] are still shared by the overwhelming majority in Western societies. The real political problem is the one-sided interpretation, zealotic intolerance and denouncing of other opinions by certain left-liberal political, academic and media actors—as well as the diverse reactions of other societal forces.[10] To ensure the survival of Western-style democracies, this deformation and even destruction of common platforms of political exchange has to be addressed by moderate political forces, particularly conservative–liberal ones. In contrast,

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[7] See D. Mercea and L. Mosca, 'Understanding Movement Parties Through Their Communication', *Information, Com-munication & Society* 24/10 (2021); and C. Bickerton, *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[8] The factors that have contributed most to the decline of centrist parties are the decline in membership, negligence of programmatic renewal and maladaptation to the new communication environment. For a comparative overview of the causes of this decline, see P. Liddiard, *Are Political Parties in Trouble?*, Wilson Center, History and Public Policy Pro-gramme Occasional Papers (December 2018); and M. Lisi, *Party System Change, the European Crisis and the State of Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[9] In a strict sense, democracy is not a value but rather a *political method* to ensure the realisation of basic values.

[10] There is an interesting paradox. Many on the left who are seeking to limit free speech are doing so out of the sense that it is the right thing to do both morally and ethically, and that they are doing it to protect and advance diversity and 'progress'. The result is often quite the contrary. As the old saying goes, 'The road to hell is paved with good inten-tions.'

an essentialist approach to values, in a quest to uncover the 'true' interpretation, is not a constructive approach. Consensus can only be achieved through a deliberative process by society itself.[11]

The paper will analyse certain characteristics of the current public debate. It begins by presenting a short history of the relationship between the political and cultural systems in the last century and of how modern forms of communication have changed the space for public discourse. Based upon this analysis, it develops ideas from a conservative–liberal perspective on how to regain or re-strengthen the political position of centrist parties.[12]

Cultural wars and centre–right politics

There is enough empirical evidence that over the last two decades, especially in the *semantic framing*[13] of cultural discourse, the recalibration of what may and may not be said has massively changed the political landscape in Western democracies. This includes a widening gap between elite-based discourse and public opinion.[14] While the public has surprisingly remained very much centrist regarding fundamental values,[15] the views of the elite—whether set forth in the media or in academic discourse—have dramatically shifted towards leftist and liberalistic ('progressive') positions.[16] At the same time, traditional conservative–liberal parties are constantly denounced as being anti-progressive, reactionary or even right-wing extremists. This deliberately and strategically biased framing has successfully contributed to the long-term decline of centrist political parties all over Europe.

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[11]   Cf. Jürgen Habermas's 'discourse theory of democracy', which makes 'communicative rationality' the core requirement for and mechanism of democracy. Neither the implications nor the limitations of this concept can be discussed here. See Research in Political Philosophy and Ethics Leuven (RIPPLE), 'Deliberative Democracy and Its Blind Spots', KU Leuven (2 October 2022).

[12]   The important role of the centre–left parties, which are mainly Social-Democratic parties, should be mentioned but cannot be further elaborated in this paper.

[13]   See H. Bruijn, *The Art of Political Framing: How Politicians Convince Us That They Are Right* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019); and M. Oswald, *Strategische Framing: eine Einführung* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019).

[14]   On the problem of public (öffentliche) versus published (*veröffentlichte*) opinion, see U. Sarcinelli, 'Öffentliche Meinung', in U. Andersen et al. (eds.), *Handwörterbuch des politischen Systems der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2021).

[15]   F. Reho and A. Blanksma Ceta, *Standing in Unity, Respecting Diversity*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2022).

[16]   For the situation in Germany, see M. Güllner, *Der vergessene Wähler* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2022).

Why are conservative–liberal parties struggling so hard to counter these developments? What has made them more vulnerable than other parties to these framing mechanisms in media and public discourses? Is there any chance of turning this situation around and seeing this result in election gains?

An unpleasant affair: conservativism and the cultural production system

Throughout the twentieth century, a somewhat complicated relationship prevailed between *democratic* conservative parties in Western democracies and the dominant cultural and intellectual forces (the *cultural production system*).[17] In early post-war times, successful pragmatic policies and stabilising milieux (e.g. churches and trade unions) were mainly responsible for creating a stable ideological framework that worked in favour of conservatism and Christian Democracy (as well as centrist Social Democracy). From the 1960s onwards, however, we see a cultural watershed or 'silent revolution',[18] which came together with a weakening of traditions, higher demands for state intervention and the provision of alternative meanings in a rapidly secularising society. These trends gained momentum rapidly towards the end of the twentieth century, when socio-economic and technological changes such as digitalisation and globalisation functioned as multipliers.[19] Postmodernism and related philosophies have contributed decisively to the relativism of values and knowledge, while growing wealth has reshaped perceptions of and the demands placed on politics.

Politics can be understood to a large extent as what Murray Edelman calls 'symbolic (inter)actions'.[20] The growing importance of symbols in politics opened channels into the core political system for new social groups with a strong background in and links to the cultural production system. When it came to activist engagement and narratives, left and green parties were able to take much more advantage of these movements as they managed to ride the cultural wave by connecting with para-party organisations, adapting their communication skills and developing new recruiting modes.

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[17] The threats in the 1920s and 1930s came from extremist forces on both the left and the right. In the media only a few defenders of a liberal society remained. See B. Dietz, '"Conservative Revolution" in Europe? Radical Conservatism in a Transnational Perspective, 1918–1939. Introduction', *Journal of Modern European History* 15/1 (2017); and J. Chernish, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[18] See R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

[19] For a critical discussion, see R. Münch, 'Die "Zweite Moderne": Realität oder Fiktion? Kritische Fragen an die Theorie der reflexiven Modernisierung', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 9 (2002), 417–43.

[20] M. Edelmann, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (Chicago: Markham, 1971).

In contrast, the established post-war party system and the dominance of centrist parties went into decline (or even dissolution) as they were often too complacent in identifying the fundamental threats, developing alternative narratives and tapping into the needs of the younger generations. This change was supported by multinationals, mainly in the service sector (e.g. Apple and Meta). They created significant economic leverage for the new cultural movements, something that had never happened before in industrial societies.

Losing the commando heights: how conservatives failed to adapt to new forms of socio-political communication

The weakening or dissolution of traditional socio-political milieux is closely related to the emergence of new forms of communication and participation, of which social media represent only the latest stage of development. The consequences for political communication have been dramatic. As mentioned before, political action and behaviour can be understood to be driven largely by symbolic action. According to the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, dominance in political power is preceded by occupying and holding the 'commando heights' (Lenin) of political semantics.[21] To prevent others from achieving this, it is of utmost importance that one should be able to define and control the interpretation of a society's core values.[22] The rise of social media[23] and the decline of traditional mass communication channels have created unprecedented ways of targeting voters. They have also lowered the threshold for establishing new discourse spaces. These new spaces, however, are not public in the traditional sense of integrating different social or cultural milieux. These developments have come at a high price to the existing political systems because of the paradoxical situation to which they have led. On the one hand, they have opened new spaces for political communication and mobilisation; and they have contributed to a sort of democratisation and to a transcending of traditional forms of political engagement—including those typical of party politics. But on the other hand, these developments have largely de-legitimised and even destroyed traditional (media) platforms and public spaces. In the place of widely shared semantics and established (and controlled) channels for

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[21] See G. Hoare and N. Sperber, *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci: His Life, Thought and Legacy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), Chapter 5.

[22] See C. Leggewie, 'Kulturelle Hegemonie: Gramsci und die Folgen', *Leviathan* 15/2 (1987). A good example of an (failed) attempt is the 'geistig-moralische Wende' (spiritual–moral turnaround) in the early years of the first government of Helmut Kohl in the 1980s.

[23] See A.-M. Auvinen, *Social Media – The New Power of Political Influence*, Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2012), Chapter 2.

cross-party competition, they have given rise to polarisation and the demonisation of political enemies.[24]

One sees these developments clearly in the growing debates on 'wokeness', 'postcolonialism' and 'cancel culture', which are often considered the most recent manifestations of cultural wars in Western societies.[25] Never before in post-war Western societies has there been such a massive wave of self-censorship, of mobbing those whose opinions some find unpleasant,[26] and of biases in public and private debates.[27] Plenty of examples are provided by the political discussions on individual versus collective rights, and traditional versus modern values. These discussions have been creating an increasingly unlevel playing field for conservative ideas.

To gain a better understanding of the underlying mechanism and to prepare for regaining ground,[28] two dimensions of the debate must be distinguished. The first dimension is rather traditional. It is about securing a correct understanding of values. A good example is the question of finding the right balance between (individual) rights and duties for the community—a classic *topos* of political ethics.[29] This question should be addressed politically. But this does not mean there is any way back to a collectivistic model of society. From a modern conservative–liberal perspective, the answer lies, rather, in finding new forms of societal and political participation with the objective of broadening citizen engagement. A more difficult case is the reinterpretation of values that are central in traditional conservativism, such as family or marriage. Over the last three decades, most European constitutions have tended to widen the notion of marriage to include various relationships between partners, whether from different sexes or the same sex.[30] The same goes for the understanding of family.[31] Given the framework of *secular* constitutions in Western democ-

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[24] Cf. the distinction between 'Freund' (friend) and 'Feind' (enemy) in Carl Schmitt's political philosophy. The latter is not a legitimate player in the political game but someone who has to be eliminated.

[25] Z. Stanton, 'How the "Culture War" Could Break Democracy', *Politico*, 20 May 2021. The term 'cultural wars' was originally coined in J. D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

[26] See R. Pfister, *Ein falsches Wort: Wie eine neue linke Ideologie aus Amerika unsere Meinungsfreiheit bedroht* (Hamburg: Spiegel, 2022).

[27] See T. Petersen, 'Die Mehrheit fühlt sich gegängelt', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 June 2021.

[28] This will be discussed in the next section.

[29] See U. Di Fabio, *Die Kultur der Freiheit: Der Westen gerät in Gefahr, weil eine falsche Idee der Freiheit die Alltagsvernunft zerstört* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005).

[30] For an overview of the diverse meanings of 'marriage', see German Federal Government, Scientific Services, 'Der Begriff der Ehe im Grundgesetz und anderen Verfassungen. Sachstand', WD 10 – 3000 – 044/17 (2017).

[31] Germany's Christian Democratic Union has set this in concrete in its well-known statement, 'Familie ist überall dort, wo Eltern für Kinder und Kinder für Eltern dauerhaft Verantwortung übernehmen' (*Family is wherever parents take on lasting responsibility for children and children for parents*). Christian Democratic Union of Germany, *Grundsätzlich CDU: Grundsatzprogrammprozess der CDU* (1 February 2023).

racies, there is no longer any chance of anchoring a traditional understanding of the family in these constitutions. The definition remains the result of a sort of bargaining process within a society.[32] Substantiating an alternative definition would require having recourse to extra-constitutional sources such as religious laws.[33] And even the majority of conservative voters in Europe and the US would not consider this a feasible option.

The crux of the matter lies elsewhere, and here we come to the second dimension of the debate. An analysis of current political discourse shows that the political battlefield is characterised by what can be described as 'pre-emptive strikes': limiting the use of core political concepts such as 'freedom' and even utterly excluding wording considered to be tainted. This (self-)censorship strategy can be seen as a fundamental attack on what is the *basic mechanism* of deliberative democracy: an open public space for rational discourse.[34] The attack includes the intolerance, one-sidedness and growing attempts to impose only particular interpretations of values in a more-or-less coercive way: by direct state intervention or through media and education. This is a far more significant threat to a democratic society than specific interpretations of values *per se*. And it is this that conservatives are deeply concerned about. Therefore, the *procedural element* of democracy must be put at the centre of any strategy to maintain democratic systems and to recreate a level playing field for conservative–liberal political thought and movements.

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[32] This position should not be misunderstood as ethical relativism. The dignity of the human person can be considered an absolute value, but the means by which this objective is achieved or preserved changes over time.

[33] This would destroy the concept of a unified legal and secular constitutional framework. We can see this in, e.g., certain Asian countries where the shariah has been introduced as a by-law in the secular constitutions from the era of independence.

[34] This rests on Habermas's idea that this space for rational discourse is the core mechanism of liberal democracies. See J. Habermas, *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2022).

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Overcoming weaknesses in the area of communication: focus on solutions and become the guardian of an open society

It may seem to be an uphill battle, but rebalancing the public discourse in an age of cultural wars is not a lost cause for conservative–liberal parties. In recent years there have been several attempts by conservative–liberal philosophers and political thinkers to counter the dominant narratives.[35] A careful scrutiny of these narratives often reveals well-known patterns from past discussions, but 'wrapped' in new wording. From a purely philosophical point of view, they hardly pose new and insurmountable intellectual challenges. Therefore, conservative parties have good reason to take up the fight self-assertively. They can tap into their own rich history of thought, which provides much inspiration for current debates.

A good example is the debate on the alleged failures of market-based solutions, which has gained momentum in discussions on climate change. The shortcomings of pure market economies had already been widely discussed in the 1920s through to the 1950s.[36] But a renewed understanding of the principles of the social-market economy can provide a basis for developing effective solutions for a low-carbon transition.[37]

The current deplorable situation is often the result of self-imposed complacency rather than of an inability to meet real conceptual challenges. The weakness of conservativism does not lie in the realm of ideology; moreover, there is a surprisingly broad consensus[38] among and across different social milieux on the fundamental values of our political system. But this being the case, how are we to account for the decline of conservativism? Part of the answer lies in the loss of traditional third-party organisations that used to function as 'middlemen' and 'interpreters'. These include churches and trade unions. This has been very detrimental for conservative–liberal parties. These parties' own, weakened structures have been unable to take on the roles once played by these organisations. As these are long-term, irreversible trends, a two-fold approach is recommended. It requires patience and perseverance as there will be no quick gains.

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[35] See, among many others, R. Scruton, *Against the Tide* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2022); A. Wolfe, *The Future of Liberalism* (London: Vintage, 2010); A. Rödder, *Konservativ 21.0: Eine Agenda für Deutschland* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019); and M. Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper, 2017).

[36] For a good discussion on revitalising the concept of the social-market economy, see T. Tietmeyer and P. Solaro, *Neue Herausforderungen der Sozialen Marktwirtschaft: Das deutsche Wirtschaftsmodell in einer globalisierten, digitalen und sozial wie ökologisch fragilen Welt* (Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler, 2022).

[37] See R. Fücks, 'Eine ökologisch-soziale Marktwirtschaft', *Klimaschutz und Marktwirtschaft* 17/6 (2020).

[38] See Reho and Blanksma Ceta, *Standing in Unity, Respecting Diversity*.

1. The strong point of Europe's centrist parties was always providing people with concrete solutions, not fighting ideological wars. The parties should once again take up a pragmatic, solution-oriented approach, one that is less ideologically charged. This is what most voters are looking for.

2. This does not mean, however, giving up the fight on the ideological front. The conservative–liberal parties need to significantly develop their ability to communicate. Two fields need to be addressed urgently: recruitment and intellectual–cultural networks. Parties must systematically strengthen their efforts to reach out to the broader conservative–liberal intellectual, academic and media networks. These networks are crucial to developing new ideas and making an impact on society; and from their ranks come promising recruits. And yet, to date they have remained largely untapped. Parties, political foundations and other party-affiliated organisations have to spend more resources on training their young professionals in the dos and don'ts of political campaigning, the ideological fundaments and the ability to translate these foundational insights into new political solutions. All this could be done within the existing educational institutions. But the party-affiliated organisations should focus on making use of their own structures, since turning the cultural tide within existing institutions (e.g. universities) would take many years. This includes, first and foremost, the fight against the abuse and biased interpretation of concepts central to our political system, such as freedom, development and individual rights. Both the core political message and the chief strategy should aim at preserving the preconditions for an open, functioning liberal democracy. Conservative liberalism can refer to a long history of struggling against totalitarianism, promoting societal integration and safeguarding the achievements of the Enlightenment.

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Conclusion

It is not only external, authoritarian forces which undermine the legitimacy and functioning of liberal democracies and open societies. Culture wars in the West have led to a polarisation of societies and politics. These conflicts are destroying the space for free and rational public discourse, which lies at the heart of a pluralistic society. Political parties of the centre–right (and centre–left) are essential actors in stable liberal democracies, and it is they that are most affected by this development. They have to improve their organisational and communicative performance. And they must invest more in training their members and in mobilising their broader network among conservative–liberal intellectuals, academics and people working in the media. Only in this way will the centrist parties be able to regain the ground that has been lost on the cultural battlefield.

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