



# Europe's quest for sustainability: An opportunity for centre–right parties?

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## Abstract

The reasons for the decline of European centre–right parties since the 1990s are widely debated and subject to different explanations. One such explanation is that there has been a lack of an overarching narrative. In recent years, sustainability has become a dominant concept in European political debates. The article analyses whether this concept could become the core of a new political vision for centre–right parties and should no longer be considered only a leftist–green project. Three significant aspects of sustainability are discussed: future value creation, foreign relations and the future of democracy. In all three fields, there is a huge potential to redefine sustainability beyond the narrow environmentalist understanding, linking this approach to a long history of conservative, Christian Democratic thinking. For Europe as a global actor, sustainability could become a key component of its normative power, with many opportunities to link up with similar initiatives in other world regions.

## Keywords

Middle class, Sustainability, Centre–right parties, Conservatism, EU

## Introduction

The reasons for the decline of European centre–right parties<sup>1</sup> since the 1990s are widely debated and subject to different explanations. One explanation is the loss of a comprehensive ‘grand narrative’ (*‘Großerzählung’*) which is able to integrate the various social milieux and is seen as the *ideological<sup>2</sup> complement* to the concept of people's parties

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(*Volksparteien*), a key political innovation in post–Second World War Europe. Back then, it was not only the radically reformed organisational and constitutional framework that supported the development and flourishing of this new type of political actor,<sup>3</sup> but also the overcoming of the deep ideological divides of the interwar period through shared values and a shared vision of a prospering middle-class society.<sup>4</sup> The latter can be considered one of the most important achievements in the political history of twentieth-century Europe.

Since the 1970s, and in parallel to the dissolution of the traditional social milieux in the course of societal modernisation, the integrative power of a shared ideological basis had been weakening in the centrist spectrum of European party systems (Degele and Dries 2005). It took a long time for this development to become visible, and after years of being in power, many (governing) parties disregarded the ideological vacuum which had begun to spread throughout Western European societies.

Political parties of the centre have made a variety of desperate attempts to reverse the decline in their memberships and votes. Yet, their successes, for example, by improving communication strategies or finding new ways of attracting young people, have remained modest. Fewer efforts, however, have been made to establish a new ideological basis—partly due to the belief that Western societies have come to the ‘end of ideology’ (Bell 2000) or even the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama 2020).

As a look at other, mostly autocratic, political regimes clearly shows, nothing could be further from the truth. These regimes have created alternative ideological concepts of society as counter-models to liberal Western ideas to precisely avoid or refill this ideological vacuum.<sup>5</sup>

However, pluralistic and open societies also need a concept or vision of a ‘good’ society (Popper 2011). Competing ideologies are essential in democratic societies to mobilise voters. Defining these ideologies and translating them into political programmes is one of the core functions of political parties. But is there a modern political concept or narrative that could attract centre–right voters and reflect the radically changing political and economic environment of the early twenty-first century? (Welle 2023). In recent years, ‘sustainability’ has developed into such a comprehensive concept. However, centre–right parties are still struggling to adopt and redefine sustainability as the core of a new political vision and link it back to their traditional philosophical roots. It is no surprise that this concept was and is considered a leftist–green project.

Against this background, the following article tries to dissect the major aspects of sustainability from a centre–right perspective and analyse the potential for modern conservative policies in three policy areas: value creation, foreign relations and the future of democracy. This approach also takes into account the multilevel governance system of the EU and its member states.

## Breaking out of the ideological cage: towards a comprehensive understanding of sustainability

In the public debate, the discussion on sustainability has been narrowed down and linked to environmental and climate protection.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the left and the newly emergent green parties have occupied the political market for ‘green policy’ since the 1970s. While partially their own fault, conservative and Christian Democratic parties have missed the opportunity to develop an alternative understanding, breaking away from these one-sided and narrow approaches to sustainability. This missed opportunity has contributed to a long-term decline in defining major political discourses and attracting voters, particularly young people, liberal urban groups and the lower middle classes.

A first step in regaining the public discourse is to explore the manifold dimensions of sustainability. To the surprise of even many conservatives, there are plenty of links to major strains of liberal–conservative political thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These thoughts need to be read anew and translated into attractive wording that resonates with the expectations of early-twenty-first-century European societies.

Due to its inflationary use, the notion of sustainability has been blurred. Yet the classical definition of sustainability in the Brundtland Report of 1987 still serves best as a starting point: ‘Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, 37).<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the usual dimensional approaches (e.g. economic, ecological and social), this author has chosen a different perspective, one which makes it easier to connect sustainability to existing basic concepts of centre–right political thinking.

The following four dimensions of sustainability shall serve as points of reference:

1. *Intergenerational responsibility.* Acceleration, shrinking time and linearity have often been marked as the main characteristics of modern societies: from accounting systems to individualisation, these phenomena reflect a radically changed attitude towards and perception of time (Rosa 2005). This marks a fundamental break with traditional societies, which were often based on a (semi-)circular concept of time. It is no surprise that conventional conservative and Christian thinking has been struggling with this time ‘revolution’ for the last two centuries (Müller 2018). One of the most unpleasant social consequences of this development is a dramatic loss of intergenerational coherence and responsibility in modern societies. In addition, the core institutions of modern Western democracies, such as their welfare systems, have massively contributed to this ‘intergenerational disentanglement’ by taking over responsibility for well-being from individuals and smaller societal units, such as families.

2. *Individual responsibility.* In complex social and economic systems, the connection between actions and their consequences has been massively weakened and this lies at the core of why system redesign and behavioural changes often fail—to the detriment of sustainability. In principle, market-driven transactions based on individual property rights were invented to enhance interpersonal and intertemporal liabilities. Yet, late-modern developments such as globalisation, consumerism and corporatism have systematically weakened personal responsibility in organisations or even dissolved it completely in complex supply chains and virtual spaces.
3. *Circularity.* Linear thinking in production and consumption dominates modern industrial societies, regardless of their political systems. Fossil energy consumption and most of the material flows follow the principle of disposable, one-way use.<sup>8</sup> The capacity of physical but also social systems to regenerate is deliberately not built in. By excluding relevant cost factors, for example the use of common goods, price signals have systematically distorted the decisions of producers and consumers.
4. *Subsidiarity.* The question of who is responsible is fiercely debated in the fight against environmental degradation and climate change. Political divisions often align on the role of the state, non-state entities and the individual.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, theory and practice indicate that small-scale solutions enhance ownership and long-term implementation—in line with the basic principle of subsidiarity, which lies at the core of the constitution of the EU (Waschkuhn 1995).

All four dimensions can be found, in varying degrees, in the basic assumptions of conservative–liberal and Christian Democratic thinking, for example, represented in the idea of a social market economy.<sup>10</sup> The challenge now lies in unearthing the huge potential of the concept for innovative and integrative policy approaches—as an alternative to the dominating discourse.

## **European middle classes: expectations in a time of disruption and unpeace**

Before I elaborate in more detail on how a revised concept of sustainability could be used to create concrete policy guidelines for centre–right parties, let us take a deeper look at the current situation of the European middle classes—the social strata which are widely considered the most important political target group for centre–right parties.<sup>11</sup> Empirical surveys and electoral results reveal that, over recent years and even decades, centre–right parties have neglected the core political concerns of these groups, particularly in terms of economic and social security (Bale and Kaltwasser 2021). Massive uncertainties about their and their children's futures have led to widespread distrust in political parties and the democratic system per se. Individual uncertainties are experienced within a broader framework of economic disruptions and systematic attacks on core democratic institutions (such as malign foreign

interference), as well as long-term, slow-onset developments such as demographic shifts and climate change.<sup>12</sup> If we assume that there is a clear and strong correlation between the well-being of broader middle-class society and stable liberal democracies in many parts of the world,<sup>13</sup> then the need for a new societal consensus is more than evident. This consensus can only be built on shared ideas of the basic principles of a society.

However, at the moment, the reality could not be more different and there is no such unifying concept in sight. The economic effects of the staggering ‘polycrisis’ since 2007 have massively affected the economic perspectives and prospects of the middle classes, especially the lower segments. Perceptions of being left behind are widely shared among the middle classes due to losses in real income, shrinking opportunities in capital accumulation (mainly housing) and (assumed) elite-centred debates.

The following three sections focus on major internal and external aspects of the survival of the ‘European way of life’, applying the four dimensions of sustainability to identify possibilities but also shortcomings in the concrete application of this concept. This subject needs further research, particularly into linking it to traditional conservative and Christian Democratic thinking.

## **Future value creation**

Induced by an often-apocalyptic perspective of climate change, achieving sustainability goals is frequently linked to a (Western) debate on degrowth, which has gained momentum in academia, among non-governmental organisations and with parts of the left/green political parties (Schmelzer et al. 2022). In some cases, this is just the traditional anti-capitalistic or anti-colonial rhetoric in new clothes. But one cannot simply put aside questions about the quality, quantity and purpose of economic growth under the auspices of sustainability. There is a broad consensus across the political spectrum that growth models based on extensive fossil-fuel and raw-material consumption in non-circular value chains must end. However, future value creation is not inevitably bound to this type of production and consumption. The EU has a great chance to lay new foundations for long-term, sustainable growth in Europe. From an international perspective, however, hopes for spillover effects into developing countries to encourage them to change their growth model remain uncertain. Traditional (extensive) growth perceptions and the aspirations of the middle-classes in developing countries still prevail—factors that are often forgotten in Western-centred debates.

One key aspect of any new growth model is the persistent problem of inequality of income and wealth distribution, which has reached levels which stand in stark contrast to the idea of a strong middle-class society (Piketty et al. 2021). Despite rising fiscal expenditures, current (re)distribution mechanisms in European tax and welfare systems are far from sustainable. The established institutions have failed to

achieve their objective of compensating for unwanted market results and will not survive the secular demographic and labour-related changes ahead. They do not follow the principles of fair intergenerational burden-sharing, and nor are they (any longer) driven by the idea of self-responsible citizens.

To be clear: globalisation per se is not yet doomed, but the times of massive productivity and welfare gains for the Western middle classes as a result of globalisation have gone. Factoring in security demands and the necessary higher resilience of supply chains will make companies and national economies rethink the off-shoring of production. There are potential opportunities for European businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, to participate in recovering their share of global value creation. Political pressure for sustainable production, including new supply-chain requirements, might give them a comparative advantage as they already operate in a relatively advanced sustainable environment.<sup>14</sup> The effects of AI on European productivity remain unclear for the moment.<sup>15</sup>

## **Sustainable international relations**

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) define the conceptual framework for global sustainability. But their relationship with and impact on foreign relations<sup>16</sup> deserve further examination. The SDGs are built around justice, peace and stability as core elements of a sustainable international order. But these objectives can only be guaranteed by a second layer of international norms, those enshrined in the multipolar, rules-based world order that came into being after the Second World War. The current decline of this order is probably the biggest threat to the achievement of the SDGs by 2030 (Ikenberry 2018). Due to its strong commitment to the SDGs, the EU should focus primarily on restrengthening these basic international norms. Otherwise, political efforts aimed solely at achieving single SDGs are likely to be rather null and void.

Another topic of discussion regarding sustainability is related to the structure of international relations per se. Here the debate is still bound to theories of dependencies, (post-)colonial structures and anti-capitalism, dominated by left and green parties. Centre-right forces should engage more actively and self-confidently in this debate. Against a rising tide of protectionist sentiments and measures, often green-labelled, the opportunities of market-driven, liberal approaches should be highlighted. The EU needs to thoroughly review its trade policies and development cooperation, which often conflict with and weaken the sustainable transformation of third parties. This revision must happen in parallel with a critical reflection on many of the measures and regulations that the EU has introduced in the name of sustainability.<sup>17</sup>

## **Sustaining democracy**

The rising wave of authoritarianism has been a wake-up call for open societies. A renewed discussion on the resilience and innovation capacities of liberal societies is

gaining momentum. At the core of this debate lie two questions: (a) how to preserve the integrity of the mechanisms for building political consensus within a democratic society (Hefele 2023); and (b) how to create ‘the preconditions and necessary resources to make those mechanisms work’ (Böckenförde 1976, 112).<sup>18</sup> In other words: how can the internal functioning of democratic societies be *sustained*?<sup>19</sup>

While there is a relatively broad consensus on what makes democracies function, for example, the division of power, elections and freedom of expression,<sup>20</sup> we tap into more challenging waters when we try to identify the vast area of values, mentalities and customs, often defined as *political culture* (Inglehart 2006). These factors go beyond a somewhat technical understanding of the ‘mechanics politic’ but largely explain the success and failure of concrete political systems and changes. As described above, the economic thriving and social stability of the middle classes largely, yet not exclusively and sufficiently, explain the flourishing of Western-style democracies. Necessary elements, such as trust, the ability to achieve and accept consensual decisions, and cherishing common-sense over polarisation, are the result of practices which normally emerge and are internalised in pre-political contexts. The breeding ground for such dispositions has traditionally been non-state institutions such as religious communities, trade unions and charity associations, primarily supported by the middle classes.<sup>21</sup> As a somehow inevitable but unpleasant side effect of the modernisation process, these institutions have been weakened or have disappeared completely in recent decades (Reckwitz 2019). Neither societal integration through the markets nor more recent phenomena such as identity politics have been able to compensate for this decline—on the contrary, they have contributed to it. The capacity of liberal societies to reproduce themselves—in other words, their sustainability—is at stake.

As tempting as it seems, politics has to refrain from trying to compensate for the failure of those institutions with more state intervention. This would, paradoxically, further weaken those institutions and offend the principle of subsidiarity. Decades of the welfare state and, more recently, state interventionism in the name of anti-discrimination, retributive and restorative justice, and so on, have systematically weakened the ideal of free, independent citizens. The idea of building a free and responsible society from the bottom up is a central fundament of centre-right and liberal thinking.

## Conclusions

Conservative and Christian Democratic thinking could be described as ‘theories of middle range’ (Merton 1968, Chapter 2) that aim to balance and moderate intertemporal relations and power relations within and among societies and nations. Sustainability can be seen in large parts as (at least part of) a modernised concept of this thinking. Policy approaches based on an extended idea of sustainability are very well aligned with the expectations and needs of the European middle classes. There



is no reason to leave this concept to the left and green political parties, but a giant effort is needed to streamline the various policy fields with this concept.

From the perspective of Europe as a global actor, sustainability can be considered a key component of its ambition as a normative power (European Union External Action Service 2016). There are plenty of opportunities to link up with similar initiatives in other world regions, even if—at first sight—ideological differences might prevent closer cooperation due to conflict in traditional policy fields.

## Notes

1. For the sake of brevity, centre-right parties in continental Europe include liberal-conservative and Christian Democratic political movements. Jansen and Van Hecke (2011) provide a comprehensive overview of the post-war development in Europe.
2. ‘Ideology’ is used here with a neutral meaning, describing a set of fundamental assumptions about values and concepts of how a good society should work (Freeden 2003).
3. An outstanding example of acknowledging political parties as key political actors can be found in Article 21 of the German *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law); see Germany, Federal Ministry of Justice (2023).
4. On the evolution of the European middle classes see Kocka (1995). Rich insights into the (self-) perception and aspirations of the European middle classes can be found in Reho and Lambrecht (2023).
5. E.g. the Chinese Communist Party’s concept of creating a ‘moderately prosperous society’ (*Xiǎokāng Shèhuì*) since the reform and opening-up policy of Deng Xiaoping; see Mühlhahn (2022, Chapter 4).
6. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, the discussion on sustainability took a much broader view of the concept; see the famous ‘Brundtland Report’ (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987).
7. See Kuhlman and Farrington (2010) for the difficulties of defining sustainability.
8. For a very readable introduction to the fossil fundamentals of our civilisation, see Smil (2023).
9. For a view from the perspective of environmental and climate ethics, see Attfeld (2016).
10. For a modernised view of the concept of the social market economy, see Tietmeyer and Solaro (2021).
11. The difficulties of defining the middle classes are discussed in Reho and Lambrecht (2023); see also Pew Research Center (2017).
12. In recent years, the new concept of ‘resilience’ has been emphasised by the European Commission (European Commission, Joint Research Centre 2023; Juncos 2017), but this also fits well with more traditional concepts of sustainability (see Hefele (2023)).
13. Referring to the examples of China and Russia, there is now a critical discussion on the alleged connection between a rising middle class and democratisation, as famously postulated by Seymour Lipset (1959); for a critical review, see Rosenfeld (2021).
14. This does not mean that the current tsunami of regulations and directives by the European Commission, strangling entrepreneurial activities and hampering European competitiveness, should be continued.
15. On the European AI strategy see European Commission (2023a).
16. Some initial thoughts can be found in Carius et al. (2018), but so far, traditional international relations theories have not fully integrated this concept.
17. One of the latest ‘achievements’ is the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive of 2023 (European Commission 2023b), updating the Non-Financial Reporting Directive of



- 2014 (European Parliament and Council 2014).
18. In German political science this paradox is known as the ‘Böckenförde dilemma’: ‘The liberal secularized state lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself’ (Böckenförde 1976).
  19. Restrengthening the middle classes has to be at the centre of these efforts.
  20. The danger of hollowing out formal institutions and processes through the development of electoral autocracies and illiberal democracies is widely discussed, e.g. for the Central and Eastern European countries.
  21. At the latest after the Second World War, the members of the working classes considered themselves an important part of the middle classes, too.

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