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Twenty-five years of party positional data

Rovny, Jan; Polk, Jonathan; Bakker, Ryan ; Hooghe, Liesbet; Jolly, Seth; Marks, Gary; Steenbergen, Marco; Vachudova, Milada

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PO Box 117
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The 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey on political party positioning in Europe: Twenty-five years of party positional data

Jan Rovny^a, Jonathan Polk^{b,*}, Ryan Bakker^{c,i}, Liesbet Hooghe^{d,e}, Seth Jolly^f, Gary Marks^{d,e}, Marco Steenbergen^g, Milada Anna Vachudova^h

^a Sciences Po, Paris, France^b Lund University, Sweden^c University of Sharjah, UAE^d University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA^e European University Institute, Florence, Italy^f Syracuse University, USA^g University of Zurich, Switzerland^h University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USAⁱ University of Essex, Colchester, England

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ABSTRACT

This research note introduces the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) on party positioning in Europe. When combined with earlier waves of CHES data, this new data set provides estimates of the ideological and policy positions of political parties over twenty-five years of European politics, 1999–2024. The note demonstrates the value of the time series by examining two important trends in European politics: potential changes in the economic left-right positioning of radical right parties, and the emergence of a transnational cleavage composed of European integration and immigration. The note further explores two new items in the 2024 survey designed to measure horizontal accountability: party positioning on executive constraints and judicial independence. This illustrates the value of CHES EU data on party positioning both over time and through innovations in the seventh and most recent survey.

1. Introduction

How has political competition in Europe evolved over the past quarter century? The last 25 years have seen the transformation of radical right parties from minor challengers on the fringes of European party systems to major actors not just in Europe's parliaments, but also in many governments (Bale and Kaltwasser, 2021; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). At the same time, the focus of European politics has shifted from the once-dominant questions around economic distribution to issues of national sovereignty and culture (Bornschieer, 2010; Kriesi et al., 2006). Finally, this period has seen a secular, at times abrupt, erosion of democratic institutions in a number of countries (Kelemen, 2017; Vachudova, 2021).

This note takes stock of these developments using the new trend data of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) on political party positioning in Europe, starting in 1999 and now updated to 2024. This makes CHES the

longest running expert survey on party positioning in Europe and offers scholars of electoral and party politics information about changes and continuity in the ideology of political parties over a dynamic quarter century.

In the following sections, we demonstrate three significant trends: We show that radical right parties are taking increasingly heterogeneous positions on the economic dimension (Rovny and Polk, 2020). We also show that the transnational cleavage combining positions on national sovereignty and immigration has come to structure political competition in Europe in a durable way (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Jackson and Jolly, 2021). Finally, we highlight an emergent conflict over liberal democracy, in particular on the value of executive constraints and judicial independence, key pillars of horizontal accountability (Lührmann et al., 2020; Angiolillo et al. 2025). These are new items included in the 2024 CHES survey.

* Corresponding author. Department of Political Science, Box 52, 221 00, Lund, Sweden.

E-mail address: jonathan.polk@svet.lu.se (J. Polk).

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1.1. The 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey on party positioning in Europe

The 2024 wave of CHES EU provides estimates about the positioning of party leadership for 279 political parties in 31 countries. The 2024 survey covers all European Union (EU) countries except Luxembourg and further includes Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom.¹ In total, 609 political scientists with specialization in political parties and European integration completed the survey. Respondents for EU-West and non-EU countries completed the survey between 10 October and November 20, 2024. Respondents for EU-East countries completed the survey between 01 November and December 17, 2024. These and other survey details are described in the codebook, which, in addition to the data set, is free for download at chesdata.eu.

2. Radical right party positioning on economic left-right

Across the twenty-five years of CHES, the dominant trend is continuity. For example, despite the substantial changes and tumultuous course of European politics between 1999 and 2024, most party families maintain rather stable positions on European integration throughout the period (Jolly et al., 2022). Yet there are prominent exceptions to this pattern of stability (Koedam, 2022), and one of the most widely discussed is the evolution of the radical right party family on the economic left-right dimension.² We assess West and East Europe in turn.

Canonical scholarship on the radical right in western Europe emphasized the combination of extremely conservative positioning on the socio-cultural dimension, e.g., on immigration and integration regimes, with market-friendly, right-leaning stances on the economic dimension (Kitschelt, 1995). Yet by the early 21st century, some radical right parties appeared to have embraced welfare chauvinism, signaling a desire to preserve the welfare state for the native population (Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016). If this is part of a general trend, we would see radical right parties take more centrist or left-of-centre positions on the economic dimension, even if these stances are blurred (Rovny, 2013; Afonso and Rennwald, 2018) or focus selectively on specific aspects of welfare recalibration (Enggist and Pinggera, 2022).

The right-hand panel of Fig. 1 visualizes the development of radical right parties' economic left-right positioning over time for western Europe, weighted by vote share. There is a slight tendency of the parties to move left between 2002 and 2014, but this trend reverses in 2019 and 2024, even though most year-to-year shifts are not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p < 0.05$).³ At the same time, the dispersion in economic left-right positioning increases from 2002 onwards, indicating that the party family is becoming more diverse over time. The radical right now includes many large parties, such as the French

Rassemblement National, that take vaguely center-left economic positions, and newcomers, notably the Spanish Vox or the German Alternative für Deutschland, that take economically right-wing positions.⁴

In Central and Eastern Europe, rallying voters to support strong free market policies was not attractive for the radical right – the “winning formula” of social and economic conservatism (Kitschelt, 1995) did not apply to the radical right in the East. In the early 2000s, most radical right parties stood left on the economic spectrum, primarily because they voiced the grievances of the economic ‘losers’ of post-communist transition (Minkenberg, 2002). However, as the left-hand panel of Fig. 1 shows, the trajectory of the radical right in the East has been a mirror image of the West. Indeed, while some western parties have shifted left, in the East, some parties have shifted to the economic center or center-right, resulting in an overall rightward shift. As a result of this, and similar to the West, the distribution has become more dispersed. By 2019 we see the formation of two kinds of eastern radical right parties: the electorally more significant remain economically left-leaning, such as Hungarian Fidesz or Polish PiS, and a newer group combines extreme cultural conservatism with economic liberalism, which includes e.g. Konfederacja, the political formation of Janusz Korwin Mikke in Poland, and Resni.ca in Slovenia. By 2024 the most striking feature of the radical right family is its greater internal heterogeneity on the economic dimension of political competition, and this is apparent both across Europe and within East and West.

3. Political party positioning and the transnational cleavage

The economic left-right dimension remains secondary to the politics of the radical right. Immigration and European integration, however, constitute the very essence of the party family's brand (Mudde, 2007; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Restrictive positions on immigration express the nativism of these parties, and opposition to European integration allows radical right parties to differentiate themselves from the pro-EU positions of most mainstream parties. Immigration and the EU form the core of a transnational cleavage that is now a key feature of European party politics (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Bornschier et al., 2024).

Fig. 2 illustrates the emergence of the transnational cleavage by displaying the bivariate correlations between European integration and immigration from 2006 to 2024⁵ and between economic left-right and European integration from 1999 to 2024 for all parties. The correlation between economic left-right and EU positioning has steadily weakened since 2002, so much so that by 2024 it is effectively zero. In contrast, the association between immigration and EU integration has strengthened sharply. The steepest increase happened between 2014 and 2019, from 0.31 to 0.51, and it tightened further to 0.53 in 2024, suggesting that the transnational cleavage may be durable.⁶

4. Which parties support executive constraints and judicial independence?

The poles of the transnational cleavage juxtapose the Green party family, at the extreme of the Green, Alternative, Libertarian (GAL) side of the GAL-TAN dimension, with the radical right at the far end of the Traditional, Nationalist, Authoritarian (TAN) side of this divide (Dassonneville et al., 2024). Importantly, these sides of the transnational cleavage also correlate with positions on key features of liberal

¹ Too few experts completed the survey for Luxembourg.

² We follow the terminology of the CHES codebook in referring to this party family as “radical right”, while acknowledging that the “rightness” of the party family is questionable relative to its clear position on the TAN side of the GAL-TAN divide. Further, radical right parties are a subset of the broader “far right” categorization scheme (see, e.g., Golder, 2016), and, following this terminology, some “extreme right” parties are grouped within the radical right party family in the CHES codebook to limit the number of party families. We emphasize that researchers should examine the family coding for specific parties of interest and make categorization choices that reflect their substantive assessments and particular research questions (see, e.g., De La Cerda and Gunderson 2024).

³ Only the shifts between 2002 and 2006 are statistically significant at conventional levels in both regions, east and west. Variance ratio tests provide no significant results.

⁴ It is not just the radical right party family that is becoming more diverse, causing unexpected overlaps among party families and positions. For example, having splintered from an established left party, Germany's new Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) party can be understood as a far-left party with far right positions on the cultural dimension.

⁵ The immigration policy question was first included in the survey in 2006.

⁶ A closer look by party family (not shown here) confirms that Green parties and radical right parties define the bookends of this cleavage.

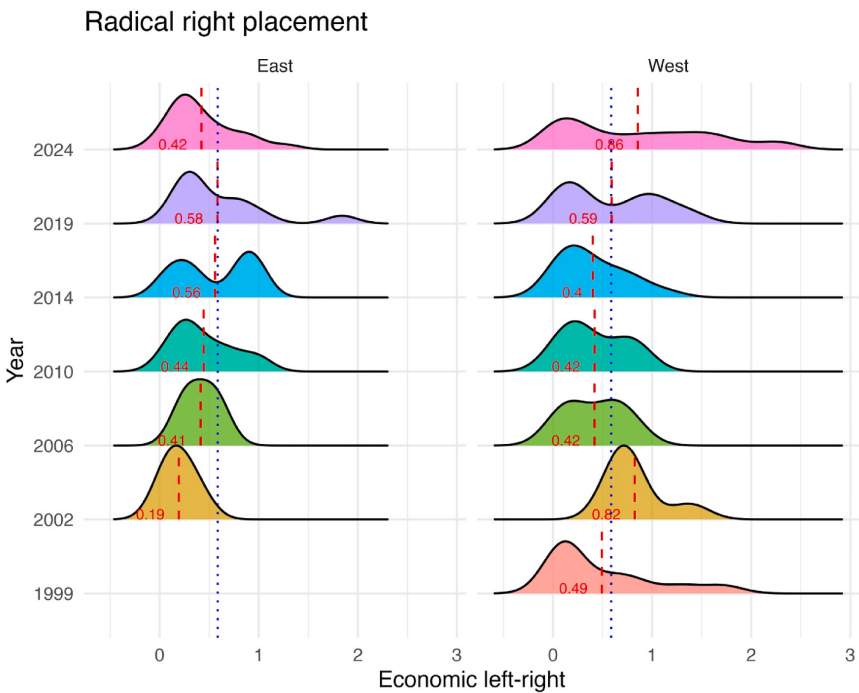


Fig. 1. Radical right placement on economic left-right over time and across East and West Europe. Weighted by vote. Red lines and values indicate annual means, blue lines indicate the general mean.

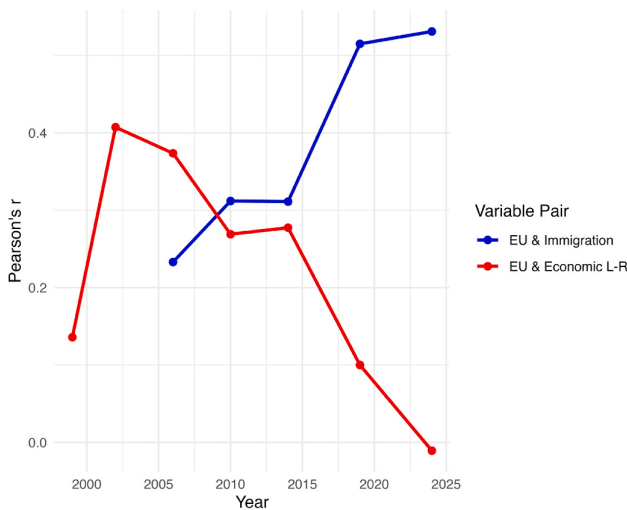


Fig. 2. Correlation between EU and immigration, and EU and economic left-right over time. All parties.

democracy: constraints on executive power, and judicial independence. For the first time in 2024, CHES EU included questions about party positioning on institutional checks and balances. For executive power, experts were asked to place political parties in their country on a scale ranging from 0 (executive leaders should be constrained in their actions) to 10 (executive leaders should be able to act without constraint). On judicial independence, experts placed parties on a 0–10 scale ranging from 0 (the judiciary should be independent) to 10 (the government should have influence over the judiciary). These two items alone may not be sufficient to measure support for liberal democracy at the party or party system level (see Medzihorsky and Lindberg, 2024; Angiolillo et al. 2025), but they are central to many definitions of the concept,

particularly as it relates to horizontal accountability (Lührmann et al., 2020).

Fig. 3 shows for each party family the distribution of a factor that combines these two items, which we label horizontal accountability, with East on the left and West on the right. The families are arranged from most to least supportive. In contrast to the wide variation on economic left-right among the radical right (Fig. 1), we observe greater homogeneity on horizontal accountability within the family. More striking is that radical right parties are by far the party family least supportive of horizontal accountability, particularly in the West, statistically significantly more so than any other party family.⁷

Three additional points are worth stressing. First is the difference in horizontal accountability between radical right and radical left parties. While these parties are frequently placed in the same overarching group of ‘populist’ parties, their support of core democratic principles could not be more distinct. Indeed, Vachudova (2021: 480) observes that European left populists, especially in power, may shed their radicalism and become “more ordinary democratic parties”, which is not the case for radical right parties.

Second, note the difference between Conservative and Christian Democratic parties. Conservatives are next closest to the radical right in opposing constraints on executive power and an independent judiciary, while Christian Democrats, particularly in the West, support horizontal accountability. This variation within the mainstream right is notable. Christian Democrats are most supportive of liberal democracy alongside Liberal, Socialist, and Green families. It is important to keep in mind that the gap between the radical right and the Conservatives is substantial in both regions; still, it highlights the complexities facing mainstream right-wing parties as they confront electoral and ideological challenges from the radical right (Bale and Kaltwasser, 2021).

Third is that Green parties and radical right parties stand at opposite ends of this issue dimension. This suggests that party contestation on

⁷ The radical right family is significantly less supportive of horizontal accountability compared to all other party families.

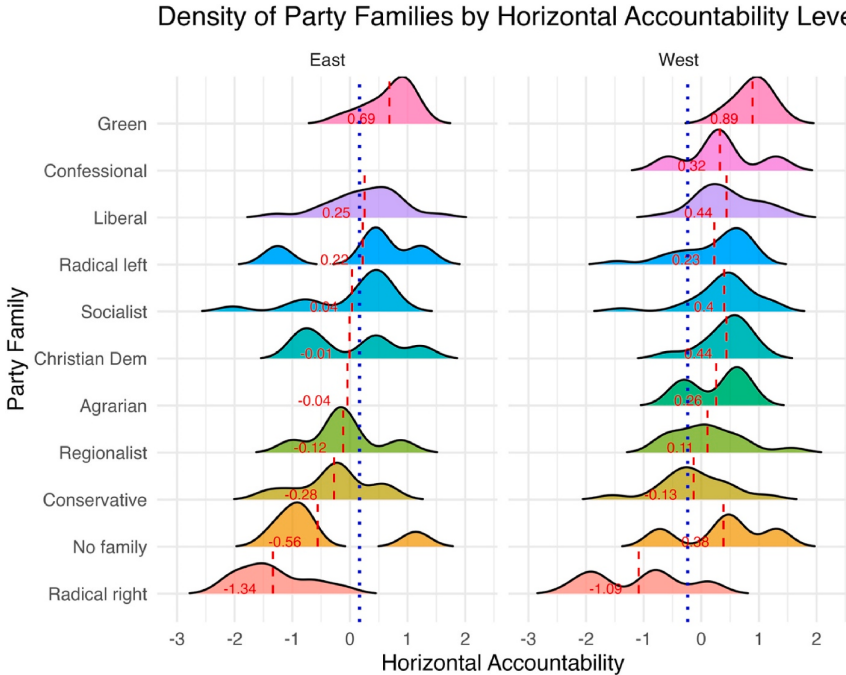


Fig. 3. Distribution of party family placements on horizontal accountability (a principal factor of executive power and judicial independence) across East and West in 2024. Red lines and values indicate party family means, blue lines indicate general means.

democratic governance has become part and parcel of the transnational cleavage. As Fig. 4 shows, party positioning on horizontal accountability is indeed strongly associated with party positions on EU integration ($r = 0.73$ in the East, and $r = 0.55$ in the West).

Interestingly, the relationship between horizontal accountability and EU integration is particularly strong in the East where the process of EU integration coincided with democratic transition and consolidation (Vachudova, 2005), and where the EU remains a practical, as well as symbolic, beacon of democratic progress (Koval and Vachudova 2024).

Together with the strong correlation between EU positioning and immigration (Fig. 2), the evidence presented here suggests a general association between the transnational cleavage and support or opposition for key tenets of liberal democracy.

5. Discussion

This research note focuses on key trends in political competition in Europe over the past several decades. It introduces the 2024 wave of the

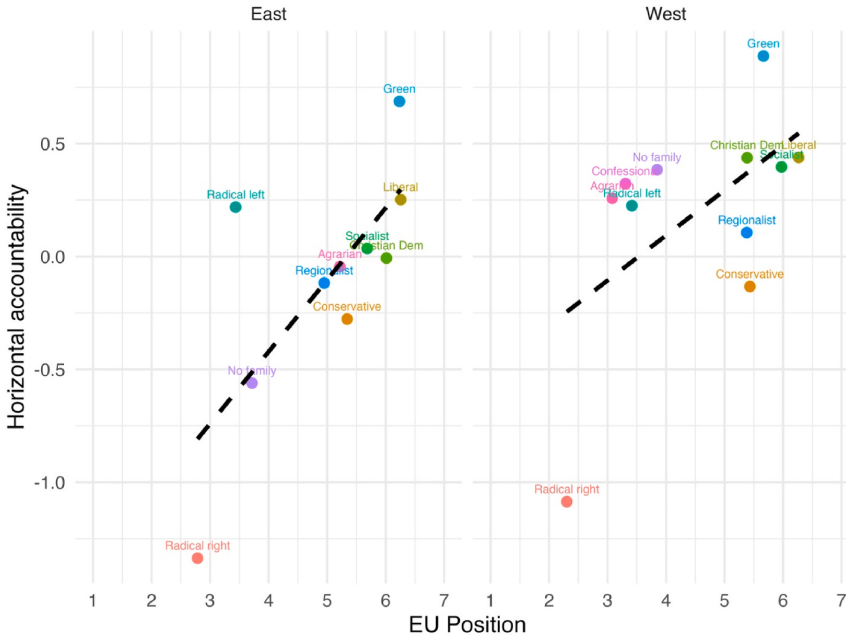


Fig. 4. Association between EU position and horizontal accountability across east and west Europe with aggregate party family locations.

Chapel Hill Expert Survey on political party positioning in Europe. When paired with the six prior waves of the survey, CHES EU provides estimates of party ideology and policy positions across twenty-five years. We illustrate the utility of this time series via an examination of the economic left-right positioning of the radical right and the emergence of the transnational cleavage.

Radical right parties in western Europe have moved somewhat to the left on the overarching economic dimension, mainly driven by the larger, more established parties. However, at the level of the family, these shifts are not statistically significant and expert placements remain highly dispersed for these parties. This may reflect strategic ambiguity on the part of this party family on the economic dimension (Rovny, 2013). In Central and Eastern Europe, the trend runs in the opposite direction, with some radical right parties becoming more economically right-leaning, and again, with a high level of dispersion within the party family. In both regions, the greater dispersion of radical right parties on the economic dimension highlights a new dynamic: the arrival of parties that are more right-leaning on the economic dimension than their older counterparts. More recent radical right parties, such as the Spanish Vox, Portuguese Chega, or German AfD in the West, or the Polish Konfederacja or Slovenian Resni.ca in the East are decisively more economically right-wing than established radical right parties, such as the French RN, Dutch PVV, Polish PiS or Hungarian Fidesz.

In contrast to increased heterogeneity on the economic dimension, we report a sharp increase in the correlation between European integration and immigration, a measure of the transnational cleavage. For radical right parties, these topics remain at the forefront of their political agenda. The fact that the association between immigration and European integration seems durable indicates that the transnational cleavage has indeed come to structure party competition across Europe.

The 2024 CHES EU wave also included questions designed to measure horizontal accountability in the form of institutional checks and balances. Here again we report similar results for the radical right across Europe. The radical right, East and West, is an outlier in its resistance to constraints on the executive and lack of support for judicial independence.

An area of increasing interest to survey-based scholarship, particularly the estimation of political party positions, is the use of large language models (LLMs) (e.g. Bol and Bono, 2025; Di Leo et al., 2025; Foisy et al. 2024; Mellon et al., 2024). While we have not focused on this development here, we note that these LLM-based estimates continue to rely on CHES measures as the standard benchmark for validation. This is valuable because the CHES project treats party placement as a measurement problem embedded within a clear psychometric framework (Steenbergen and Marks, 2007), which is not yet true of the LLM literature. Yet we see the continued interaction of human expert coding and LLM-based estimates of party positions as an area ripe for future research.

The trends and descriptive information presented in this note invite additional scrutiny and support a range of substantive research questions. Several dimensional and policy-specific positions can be paired with identical or very similarly worded public opinion measures from the 2024 European Election Studies Voter Study (Popa et al., 2024). Scholars of electoral and party politics are invited to use the publicly available CHES 2024 dataset and CHES trend file in their research.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jan Rovny: Writing – original draft. **Jonathan Polk:** Writing – original draft. **Ryan Bakker:** Writing – original draft. **Liesbet Hooghe:** Writing – original draft. **Seth Jolly:** Writing – original draft. **Gary Marks:** Writing – original draft. **Marco Steenbergen:** Writing – original draft. **Milada Anna Vachudova:** Writing – original draft.

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Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

Replication data and code will be posted at the website: chesdata.eu.

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