Populist pushback?

Understanding and defeating European populism

Bartek Staniszewski and William Prescott

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

bright blue analysis

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Executive summary

This report develops a new definition of European populism and a new European populism index, helping us to better understand European populist parties and voters. The report then analyses how struggling centre-right parties across Europe should respond, through accommodation or rejection, to ascendant populist party policies and tactics.

The report concludes that populism is an ideology — represented by political parties — that believe in binarism about society; namely, that there is an elite in society that is deliberately or otherwise harming ordinary people. From this, the report — through data analysis of the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey — develops an original European populism index to provide a more detailed understanding of populist and non-populist parties, of both the political left and right, across Europe.

Our data analysis finds:

- Populist parties are more likely to adopt extreme positions on economics — either very statist or pro-market — compared to non-populist parties. The least populist parties tend to be centre-right, or fairly pro-market, on the economic spectrum.
- Populist parties are more likely to be either very relativist or very moralist on social issues, although they are less extreme in their positioning on social issues than on economic issues, and they tend towards moralism on social issues more often than they do on the economy. The least populist parties tend to be centre-left, or fairly relativistic, on the social issues spectrum.

This report also develops a more detailed understanding of populist voters across Europe. Using the eleventh round of the European Social Survey and the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey, the report examined over 11,000 voters across sixteen European countries to identify the most common attitudes and characteristics of European right- and left-wing populist voters.

Our data analysis finds that the most common attitudes and characteristics of European populist voters are:

- Low institutional trust: whether that be institutions such as a national parliament, the European Parliament or the UN.
- Less likely than the average person to think that people generally can be trusted or try to be helpful.
- Once we control for all other variables, are more, not less, likely to trust politicians than the average person.
- Those who change their allegiance from centre-right to populist-right parties are more likely to: be interested in politics; be unwilling to trust domestic and international institutions; have lower levels of education; lack emotional attachment to Europe; be unhappy; lack socialisation; have no religion; and, most of all, be male.

The report identifies the four main policy and tactical approaches of populist parties across Europe:

1. Undermining existing elites and institutions. Both left- and right-wing populists try to portray themselves as defenders of the people against an elite, both domestic and international. However, they do so in different ways. For the populist right, this tends to be criticism of the elite for their cultural attitudes and power; for the populist left, this tends to be criticism of the elite for their economic power
2. Defending the 'authentic' people's economic and cultural interests. Populists typically present themselves as defenders of the 'authentic' people's economic and cultural interests.
3. Using alternatives to and attacking the mainstream media. Both right- and left-wing populists effectively target non-traditional media, which increasing numbers of voters are using as their main news source.
4. Charismatic and controversial leadership. Both left- and right-wing populist leaders use charismatic and effective leadership, although this is not characteristic of all populist parties at all times.

Based on our findings, to differentiate from centre-left and populist-right parties, the report recommends principles, policies and tactics for European centre-right parties around three priorities: people, prosperity, and participation.

People

Principles

- European countries need a much more selective immigration system.
- European countries should play a role in processing asylum claims, but should now prioritise increasing routes for resettlement, rejections and deportations.
- Migrants should expect to contribute economically and socially to stay in European countries, including through integration.
- The centre-right believes in a civic, not ethnic, patriotism.

Policies

- All low-skilled migrant routes should be closed. Instead, youth mobility visa schemes should be signed between a select number of non-European countries.
- Restrict dependant visas so that, as a general rule, only individuals, rather than their whole families, can enter a European country.
- Introduce safe and legal routes for genuine asylum seekers to enter European countries, prioritising those from countries with similar values and cultures.
- Make refugee status temporary and subject to reviews at least every five years.
- Require asylum seekers who enter European countries irregularly to wait longer for permanent residency than those who arrive by regular means.

- Work to ensure the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) allows the offshore asylum processing of irregular arrivals.
- Schools and housing associations in ethnically mixed areas should be incentivised to ensure more ethnic mixedness in the pupils and people they serve and discourage minorities from separating into distinct groups.
- Speaking fluently in the native language should be a prerequisite for receiving any benefits and achieving settlement.

Tactics

- Refrain from placing immigration at the heart of any election campaign.
- Avoid any framing of voters of populist parties as stupid, ill-informed or racist.
- Stress that belonging and citizenship of a country can be earned through settlement, rather than being based on ethnicity.
- Reject that their countries are structurally or institutionally racist.

Prosperity

Principles

- Sound money, especially fiscal discipline, is the bedrock of successful economies.
- Reject the precautionary principle in economic policymaking.
- Be pro-market, not free market.
- Welfare, including the state pension, needs to go to fewer people who get more.
- Reduce taxation on income based on effort and enterprise, and increase taxation on income that derives more from luck and inheritance.

Policies

- Achieve a public budget surplus by the end of a parliament.
- Achieve a set target for a meaningful reduction in net public debt by the end of a parliament.
- Incentivise increased public and private capital investment in the country's start-ups and infrastructure.
- Abandon the use of the precautionary principle when devising economic policies.
- Achieve a net reduction in the number of economic regulations by the end of a parliament.
- Demand all public services demonstrate successful use of AI to increase their efficiency and effectiveness.
- Replace all universal benefits — including the state pension — with means-tested ones.
- Seek to increase the state pension age and the cultural norm for retirement to 70.
- Incentivise and expand access to private pension schemes.
- Prioritise the reduction of payroll taxes above any other tax cuts.
- Introduce zoning to guarantee the building of new homes and infrastructure.

Tactics

- Place the economy at the heart of any election campaign.
- Make maximising economic growth the main mission in government.
- Do not promise any specific policy changes to certain taxes or spending in advance of an election, only principles that will be followed in government.

Participation

Principles

- Wherever practical, policy decisions should be made by elected governments.
- Wherever practical, abolish non-departmental public bodies.
- Wherever practical, decentralise power to the lowest possible tier of government.
- Opportunities for consultation and challenge of government policies should be limited.
- Democratic power always supersedes corporate power.

Policies

- Wherever possible, abolish NDPBs with a transparency or advisory function only.
- Reduce the times that government policy decisions can be judicially reviewed.
- Set time limits on all government consultations.
- Devolve as many policy competencies as possible, including on tax and spending.
- Introduce the right for employees of larger employers to request a binding referendum on employee representation on boards.
- Introduce the right and provide finance for a minimum number of employees of a limited by shares company to give a counter-offer for the purchase of the company's controlling stake whenever a takeover bid is made.
- No parliamentarian should engage in consulting or corporate advisory work unless doing so is necessary to maintain a professional licence, such as law or accountancy.
- Increase the time limit between being a minister and working for a business in a sector that the minister regulated.

Tactics

- Avoid personality politics by focussing their efforts on exposing populist policies rather than populist leaders.
- Present themselves as a talented team rather than being led by a popular person alone.
- Avoid coalitions wherever possible; instead, they should favour minority or 'confidence and supply' arrangements.

- Do not maintain a firewall with populist parties, except in Germany. Instead, they should collaborate with populist parties on an issue-by-issue basis to enable or prevent votes in parliament.
- Select more independent-minded candidates, disallowing those who disagree with specific centre-right principles rather than policies.

Chapter One: Introduction

While 'populist' parties — as defined in Chapter Two — have been a feature of European politics throughout the post-war era, their overall impact has until this century been short-lived and marginal.[1]

One of the earliest examples of post-war European right-wing populism, the French Poujadist movement, set the tone for many subsequent such movements.[2] Led by a newsagent named Pierre Poujade, Poujadism appealed to small-business owners worried about taxation and foreign influence. In January 1956, it secured 52 seats in the National Assembly, the lower house of the French Parliament. However, like many populist movements in Europe that followed in the immediate post-war period, it soon faded amidst internal divisions.

Even after the immediate post-war economic boom came to an end with the 1973 global oil shock, populists failed to break the grip of more established centrist parties, with centre-right and centre-left parties across the European continent generally alternating in power.[3]

This was achieved in two main ways. First, the centrist parties typically formed governments in their own right. This included in the UK: since the 1920s, the two dominant forces were the centre-right Conservative Party and centre-left Labour Party.[4] It also included Spain: following the restoration of democracy in 1977, the two dominant parties were the centre-right Popular Party and the centre-left Spanish Socialist Workers Party.[5]

Second, more commonly due to proportional voting systems, centrist parties alternated as the senior partners in coalition governments. From its establishment in 1949 until the 2010s, the only viable contenders to lead coalition governments in the Federal Republic of Germany were the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Germany — together with its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU) — and the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD).[6]

Meanwhile, in Sweden, the established two-bloc system, typically led by the centre-left Social Democrats and the centre-right Moderate Party, dominated that country's politics throughout the post-war period until the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats won their first parliamentary seats in 2010.[7] In the late eighties and early nineties, however, right-wing

[1] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A very short introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 33-4.
[2] Kevin Connolly, 'Grandfather of populism Poujade who shook France and the world', BBC, 22 December 2016 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38370962> [accessed 15 December 2025].
[3] Bartek Staniszewski, William Prescott, Joe Harrison and Ryan Shorthouse, 'The right road: The future of the European centre-right', Bright Blue, June 2025 <https://www.brightblue.org.uk/portfolio/right-road/> [accessed 16 December 2025], pp. 36-37.
[4] Will Prescott, "The Tories should beware the fate of Lloyd George's Liberals", *Spectator*, 6 April 2026 <https://spectator.com/article/the-tories-should-beware-the-fate-of-lloyd-georges-liberals/> [accessed 14 July 2026].
[5] Luis Ramiro and María Salvador, "Spain: Party System Change and Fragmentation", in Thomas Poguntke and Wilhelm Hofmeister, *Political parties and the crisis of democracy: Organization, resilience, and reform* (Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 218-39, pp. 220-1.
[6] Michael Angenendt and Simon D. Brause, "The Long Way towards Polarized Pluralism: Party and Party System Change in Germany", in Thomas Poguntke and Wilhelm Hofmeister, *Political parties and the crisis of democracy: Organization, resilience, and reform* (Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 82-3, pp. 82-107.
[7] Johan Hellström and Jonas Lindahl, "Sweden: The rise and fall of bloc politics", in *Coalition Governance in Western Europe*, ed. by Torbjörn Bergman, Hanna Back and Johan Hellström (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 574-610.

populist political parties slowly gained in prominence and popularity in European countries,[8] driven by a mixture of anti-immigration sentiment, in the case of France's National Rally,[9] hostility to European integration, as in the case of Britain's UK Independence Party (UKIP),[10] or regional grievances, such as for Italy's Northern League.[11] Nevertheless, in the nineties and noughties, populists were still not, for the most part, seen as serious threats to established political parties. This is not to say there were no exceptions — Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who served three terms between 1994-95, 2001-06, and 2008-11,[12] governed broadly centre-right coalitions as a 'populist' leader.[13] But even Berlusconi's own party, Forza Italia, typically ran centre-right policy platforms.[14]

It was only really by the 2010s onwards that even once-stable centrist-dominated political systems began to fracture to the point where populist parties consistently became serious contenders for or actually in power.

Across Europe in the 2010s, right-wing populist parties have either emerged as the largest parties in government or served as coalition partners. In Austria, previously dominated by the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats, the right-populist Freedom Party actually first entered into a coalition government in 2000, and did so again in 2017.[15] But by the 2024 federal election, it emerged as the largest party in the lower house, winning around 29% of the vote, although it failed to form a coalition government.[16]

In several Eastern European countries, right-wing populist parties have either led coalition governments or formed governments in their own right. In Hungary, the populist Fidesz party governed for 16 years between 2010 and 2026.[17] Originally founded as a centre-right party before pivoting to the populist right,[18] Poland's Law and Justice governed for eight years

[8] Paul Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe", *West European Politics*, 18(1) (1995), pp. 34-51, doi.org/10.1080/01402389508425056.
[9] Jon Henley, "Le Pen vote shocks France", *Guardian*, 22 April 2002 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/22/thefarright.france> [accessed 14 May 2026].
[10] Alex Hunt, "UKIP: The story of the UK Independence Party's rise", BBC, 21 November 2014 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21614073> [accessed 14 May 2026].
[11] Pietro Castelli Gattinara and Caterina Froio, "Italy: The Mainstream Right and its Allies, 1994–2018", in *Riding the populist wave: Europe's mainstream right in crisis*, ed. by Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 170-92.
[12] Andrea Colli, "Silvio Berlusconi: the property developer who became a media tycoon – and Italy's most flamboyant prime minister", the Conversation, 12 June 2023 <https://theconversation.com/silvio-berlusconi-the-property-developer-who-became-a-media-tycoon-and-italys-most-flamboyant-prime-minister-203601> [accessed 16 May 2026]; Philipp Ther, "Berlusconi: populist pioneer who rode Italy into the sand", Social Europe, 15 June 2023 <https://www.socialeurope.eu/berlusconi-populist-pioneer-who-rode-italy-into-the-sand> [accessed 15 May 2026].
[13] Paolo Gerbaudo, "Silvio Berlusconi may be gone, but Trump's still here. The rotten populist legacy is everywhere", *Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jun/12/silvio-berlusconi-italy-rightwing-populism-trump> [accessed 14 May 2026].
[14] Pietro Castelli Gattinara and Caterina Froio, "Italy: The Mainstream Right and its Allies, 1994–2018", *Riding the populist wave: Europe's mainstream right in crisis*, ed. by Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 171.
[15] Jane Mcintosh, "Austria's FPÖ: A turbulent history", Deutsche Welle, 19 May 2019 https://www.dw.com/en/austrias-fp%C3%B6-freedom-party-a-turbulent-history/a-48789817 [accessed 30 June 2026].
[16] Mercedes Ruehl, "Austrian centrist parties agree to form government without far right", *Financial Times*, 27 <February 2025 https://www.ft.com/content/8a512398-f1a0-4b8d-af54-0599225d7845?syn-25a6b1a6=1> [accessed 30 June 2026].
[17] Grégoire Roos, "Hungary election: Orbán has been defeated – but will Orbánism survive?", Chatham House, 14 April 2026 https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/04/hungary-election-orban-has-been-defeated-will-orbanism-survive [accessed 13 July 2026].
[18] Bartek Staniszewski, William Prescott, Joe Harrison and Ryan Shorthouse, "The right road: The future of the European centre-right", Bright Blue, June 2025 <https://www.brightblue.org.uk/portfolio/right-road/> [accessed 16 December 2025], pp. 177-187.

between 2015 and 2023.[19] In 2025, the party's candidate, Karol Nawrocki, won the country's presidential election[20] — while Poland is a parliamentary republic, the President can actually veto legislation.[21]

In other countries, while populist parties remain excluded from any share of power, they have taken the lead in national opinion polls. In Germany, in 2013, a new right-wing populist force, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), won only 4.7% of the vote a year following its establishment. Just four years later, following discontent over CDU Chancellor Angela Merkel's permissive asylum approach in the mid-2010s in response to the Syrian civil war, the AfD surged to 13% of the vote, making it both the largest opposition party and the first hard-right force to enter the Bundestag since the fifties.[22] Having secured almost 21% of the vote and emerging as the second-largest party in the Bundestag at the 2025 general election,[23] the AfD leads centre-right CDU/CSU by 28% to 19% in current polling at the time of writing.[24]

Germany is far from alone. In the UK, as of the time of writing, the right-wing populist Reform UK Party remains the frontrunner in most national opinion polls, albeit by an average of just one percentage point.[25]

The growth of populism in Europe has not been confined to the right, however. While they have typically been less successful, left-wing populists have emerged as serious forces in several European countries, either as the main opposition or, in fact, the governing party. Following the Eurozone debt crisis in the early 2010s, for example, the left-wing populist Syriza formed the government in Greece between 2015 and 2019, although its fortunes have since wavered amidst internal splits.[26]

In Spain, too, the left-wing populist Podemos Party emerged in reaction to austerity measures.[27] While never growing to become the largest party on the Spanish left, it secured over 21% of the vote in the 2016 general election.[28] Its vote declined to around 13% of the vote at the 2019 general election, but it managed to enter Spain's first coalition government

[19] Piotr Buras, "The long shadow of the populists: Donald Tusk's first 100 days", European Council on Foreign Relations 22 March 2024 https://ecfr.eu/article/the-long-shadow-of-the-populists-donald-tusks-first-100-days/ [accessed 13 July 2026].
[20] Jakub Iwaniuk, "In Poland, Donald Tusk's anti-populist 'revolution' fails", *Le Monde*, 3 November 2025 <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/11/03/in-poland-donald-tusk-s-anti-populist-revolution-fails_6747039_23.html> [accessed 13 July 2026].
[21] Adam Holesch, "Poland's presidential election – the end of re-democratisation?", LSE, 23 June 2025 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2025/06/23/polands-presidential-election-nawrocki-the-end-of-re-democratisation/> [accessed 13 July 2026].
[22] Matthias Dilling, 'Two of the same kind? The rise of the AfD and its implications for the CDU/CSU', in *Twilight of the Merkel era: Power and Politics in Germany after the 2017 Bundestag election*, ed. by Erix Langenbacher (Berghahn, 2019), pp. 191-210.
[23] Hans Pfeifer, "German far-right AfD sees historic gains, still out of power", Deutsche Welle, 23 February 2025 <https://www.dw.com/en/german-election-2025-far-right-afd-alice-weidel-cdu-friedrich-merz-v1/a-71725460> [accessed 12 May 2026].
[24] "Germany — National parliament voting intention", Politico, 24 July 2026 <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/germany/> [accessed 7 October 2026].
[25] "United Kingdom — Parliament voting intention", Politico, 27 July 2026 <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/united-kingdom/> [accessed 30 July 2026].
[26] Stephen Davies, *The great realignment: Why the new right is here to stay* (Polity, 2026), p. 95.
[27] Alexandros Kioupkiolis, "Late modern adventures of leftist populism in Spain: The case of Podemos, 2014–2018", in *The populist radical left in Europe*, ed. by Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupkiolis (Routledge, 2019), pp. 47-72.
[28] Ibid.

since 1977 in the following year.[29] Like Syriza, however, the party suffered from internal splits and, by 2023, had merged into another left-wing party, Sumar.[30]

More recently, this year, Bulgaria's left-wing populist party, Progressive Bulgaria, secured the first outright parliamentary majority achieved by any party since 1997, also winning almost 45% of the vote.[31] At the core of its appeal were pledges to tackle corruption and end the country's "oligarchic model of governance".[32] With the new government only having been in place for several months at the time of writing, it is too soon to determine whether it will enjoy long-term success.

The focus of this research and methodology

Much literature on populism, both critical and sympathetic,[33] has appeared in the last decade,[34] including studies of individual 'populist' parties or movements.[35] Few, however, agree on what constitutes populism, and barely any have considered how populist tactics and policies could be adapted to help revive the fortunes of established centrist parties, especially on the centre-right.[36] This report seeks to change this.

First, we will develop a new definition of European populism, before going on to better understand European populist parties and voters. Second, we will analyse how struggling centre-right parties across Europe should respond, through accommodation or rejection, to ascendant populist party policies and tactics.

Generally, the academic consensus has been that established centre-right parties that seek to ape populism are doomed to fail.[37] The evidence to date bears this out. For instance, when the centre-right French Republicans pivoted towards populism under a new leader, Éric Ciotti, after 2022, 24% of their 2022 voters switched to supporting Emmanuel Macron's less populist *Ensemble* party in the 2024 election. The French Republicans are now seen as a spent force in French politics. We cover the reasons for this more thoroughly in our 2025 report, *The right road*.[38] At any rate, a more nuanced approach than the mere imitation of populists by the centre-right is sorely needed.

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[29] Ibid.
[30] Lilith Verstrynge, "Inside the rise and fall of Podemos: 'We believed we had a stake in the future'", *Guardian*, 27 November 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/27/inside-the-rise-and-fall-of-podemos-we-believed-we-had-a-stake-in-the-future> [accessed 30 June 2026].
[31] "Bulgaria's Kremlin-friendly former president Radev wins parliamentary election", France 24, 20 April 2026 <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20260420-bulgaria-s-kremlin-friendly-former-president-radev-wins-parliamentary-election> [accessed 15 July 2026].
[32] Who are Europe's newest troublemakers?, *Economist*, 18 May 2026 <https://www.economist.com/europe/2026/05/18/who-are-europes-newest-troublemakers> [accessed 15 July 2026].
[33] Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (Pelican, 2018).
[34] See e.g. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (eds), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (Oxford University Press, 2017).
[35] See e.g. Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, *Revolt on the right: Explaining support for the radical right in Britain* (Routledge, 2014).
[36] Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Penguin, 2017).
[37] Cas Mudde, "After the far-right mass rally in London, Britain must learn lessons from abroad – and fast", *Guardian*, 19 September 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/sep/19/far-right-mass-rally-london-britain-immigration-migrants> [accessed 8 June 2026].
[38] Bartek Staniszewski, William Prescott, Joe Harrison and Ryan Shorthouse, 'The right road: The future of the European centre-right', Bright Blue, June 2025 <https://www.brightblue.org.uk/portfolio/right-road/> [accessed 16 December 2025], pp. 301-304.

Indeed, while there are notable exceptions, such as Frank Furedi's book *In defence of populism*,[39] the label populist is usually viewed as pejorative.[40] This overly negative framing creates two substantial problems. First, it risks encouraging one to overlook the factors driving the success of populist parties.[41] More concerningly, it also risks overlooking the positive lessons that established centre-right parties can actually learn from so-called populist parties.[42]

The main research questions explored in this report are:

1. What is European populism?
2. What are the main modern historical developments of the leading populist parties and traditions in Europe?
3. What are the leading political parties and traditions representing European right-wing and left-wing populism today?
4. What are the prominent and effective policies and tactics of the leading right-wing and left-wing populists across Europe today?
5. Which policies and tactics of the leading contemporary right- and left-wing populists in Europe might be effective for the centre-right to adopt and adapt, and which ones should be challenged because of their democratic and social harms?
6. How can centre-right parties and traditions best learn and benefit from — as well as challenge — populism in Europe?

For this report, we conducted two main research methods.

First, an extensive international literature and data review scrutinising relevant evidence, including academic articles and books, other think-tank reports and news articles from across Europe: including in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK. This is because, in recent decades, these countries have provided a representative mix of different and high-profile populist parties from both the left and the right; and also because of literature and data availability.

Second, data analysis of the most recent, 2024, Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) — which, since 1999, has conducted regular surveys of political scientists across Europe[43] — and the eleventh round of the European Social Survey — a biannual cross-national survey that "measures the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of diverse populations in more than thirty nations".[44] This method is explained in much more detail in the Annex.

[39] Frank Furedi, *In defence of populism* (Polity, 2026).
[40] Furedi, *defence of populism*, p. 21.
[41] Davies, *Great realignment*, p. 14.
[42] See e.g. Furedi, *Defence of populism*, pp. 21-35.
[43] Chapel Hill, "Chapel Hill Expert Survey", undated <https://www.chesdata.eu/> [accessed 12 May 2026].
[44] European Social Survey, "About ESS", undated <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/about-ess> [accessed 21 July 2026].

This report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter Two** sets out to better define European populism and understand European populist parties and voters.
- **Chapter Three** outlines the policies and tactics that have driven European populists' success in recent years, and what established centre-right parties in Europe can learn from them.
- **Chapter Four** proposes new policies and tactics for established parties of the European centre-right to adopt to help them counter the rise of populist parties.

Chapter Two: Defining populism and understanding populists

Having traced the origins and explored the recent growth of both left- and right-wing European populist parties, this chapter explores the typical characteristics of left- and right-wing European populist parties and voters. It first explores the academic definitions of populism, before introducing and explaining our new European populism index, which can be used to determine what constitutes a populist party in Europe. Our data analysis also allows us to unearth the leading characteristics and attitudes of voters of European populist parties.

What is 'populism'?

'Populism' has been used since the nineteenth century, when it was used to refer to the short-lived US People's Party.[45] However, as mentioned in Chapter One, today, the definition of populism remains unclear. It is often used in a pejorative way, and parties labelled populist rarely refer to themselves as such.[46]

Today, the academic literature tends to interpret populism in one of two main ways. The first is to define populism as a political-strategic approach. According to political scientist Kurt Weyland, for example, because different populist parties have different ideological approaches and[47] are often "top down" — being dominated by a charismatic leader — they should not be defined in philosophical terms. Instead, "the role of personalistic, plebiscitarian leadership" is central.[48] So, under this definition, the core feature of a populist party is dominant leadership.

However, this definition carries limitations. As will be discussed later in this chapter, there are clear tenets to populist thought, even if they are left-wing populists or right-wing populists. Moreover, as is the case with the German AfD,[49] the Finns Party of Finland[50] or the Swiss People's Party,[51] not all populist forces centre around a single charismatic leader, or, where they used to, have transitioned away from reliance on one.

The second definition, as proposed by academics such as Cas Mudde[52] or Jan-Werner Müller, is to describe populism as an ideology that, at its core, casts a 'pure' form of 'the people' against some form of 'corrupt elite.' This might be described as its primary ideological core

[45] Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., "Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art", in *Oxford handbook,* ed. by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., pp. 1-24, p. 2.
[46] Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, p. 2. An exception is Green Party of England and Wales Leader, Zack Polanski, who expressly defines himself as an 'eco-populist'. See e.g. Will Charley, "Who is Zack Polanski? The 'eco-populist' new leader of the Green Party", Sky News, 2 September 2025 <https://news.sky.com/story/who-is-zack-polanski-the-eco-populist-new-leader-of-the-green-party-13423647> [accessed 12 May 2026].
[47] Kurt Weyland, "Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach", in *Oxford handbook*, ed. by Kaltwasser et al., pp. 48-72.
[48] Weyland, "A Political-Strategic Approach", p. 51.
[49] Hans Pfeifer, "Germany's AfD leaders face strife at conference", Deutsche Welle, 28 June 2024<https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-afd-leaders-face-strife-at-conference/a-69503187> [accessed 7 June 2026].
[50] Peter Söderlund and Kimmo Grönlund, "Can a change in the leadership of a populist radical right party be traced among voters? The case of the Finns Party", *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 47.1 (2024), pp. 23-46 https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12263.
[51] Takis S. Pappas, "Are populist leaders "charismatic"? The evidence from Europe", *Constellations*, (2016), pp. 378-90 https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12233.
[52] Cas Mudde, "Populism: An ideational approach", in *Oxford handbook*, ed. by Kaltwasser et al., 46-70.

tenet. Müller takes this one step further and has described 'antipluralism', the idea that no one other than the populist leader can be a morally legitimate representative of the people, as the second core tenet of populism, fusing it with the first definition explained earlier.[53] Indeed, even supporters of the first political-strategic approach, such as Weyland, acknowledge that populist leaders attempt to divide society between supporters and opponents of the populist leader.[54] Reflecting his view that both left- and right-wing populists are unified by this, Mudde calls this two-pronged definition 'the "ideational"' approach.

While this second definition also carries limitations — not all populist movements, such as Greece's Syriza[55] or the Swiss People's Party,[56] can be described as antipluralist — it correctly identifies through its first ideological tenet a characteristic of all European populist movements: insistence on dividing society into a binary between a righteous people and a corrupt, established elite.

However, while both right- and left-wing populists seek to create such a binary, they do so in different ways. Right-wing populists typically define themselves against liberal cultural elites they accuse of betraying the authentic people's cultural interests.[57] By contrast, left-wing populists typically frame the divide between 'authentic people' and 'corrupt elite' in economic terms. As such, they position themselves against the economically privileged and corporate elites they accuse of exploitation and excess.[58]

Thus, our foundational definition of populism is that it is an ideology — represented by political parties — that believe in binarism about society; namely, that there is an elite in society that is deliberately or otherwise harming ordinary people. From this, we believe — through our data analysis — that we can develop a more detailed understanding of populist parties across Europe.

European populism index

As indicated in Chapter One, to determine what a populist party is in Europe, we created, using the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey — the most recent available — a new European populism index which measures, on a scale of zero to ten, how populist a given political party is.

Admittedly, other indices of populism already exist,[59] but they make the mistake of treating populism — ironically, considering the foundational tenet of populism — as a binary. As we

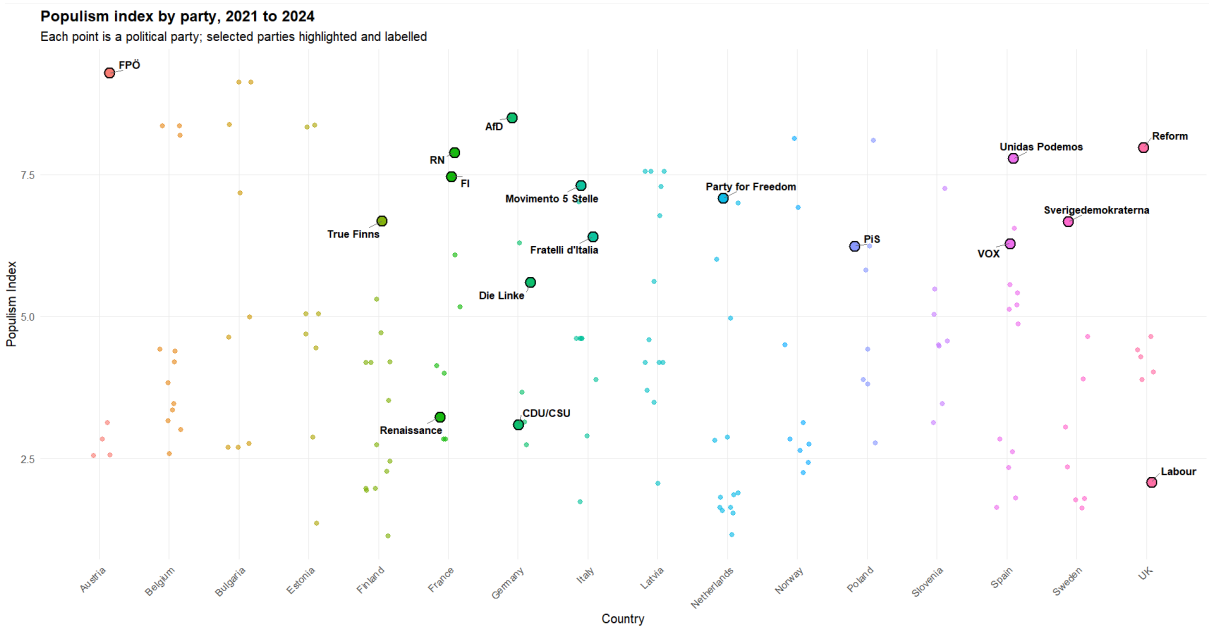
[53] Jan-Werner Müller, *What is populism* (Penguin, 2017), pp. 2-3.
[54] Mudde, "Ideational approach".
[55] Yannis Stavrakakisa and Giorgos Katsambekisa, "Left-wing populism in the European periphery: the case of SYRIZA", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19.2 (2014), pp. 119-142 http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.909266.
[56] Katy Romy, "Is the Swiss People's Party far-right?", SWI swissinfo, 22 November 2023 <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/is-the-swiss-people-s-party-far-right/48995330> [accessed 8 October 2026]
[57] Maurits J. Meijers, Robert A. Huber and Andrej Zaslove, "The anatomy of populist ideology: How political parties define 'the people' and 'the elite'", *European Journal of Political Research*, 64.2 (2025), pp. 2161-76 https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.70026.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Those include the PopuList, the Authoritarian populism index 2024, the Timbro Authoritarian populism index or the Global Party Survey. The last of these does include a slight scale, from one to four, but it also includes some strongly counter-intuitive

explain in Bright Blue's recent book *The right road: The future of the European centre-right*,[60] populism lies instead on a spectrum, and multiple European political parties flirt with populist policies and tactics without embracing them wholeheartedly, as we highlighted in Chapter One with Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia in Italy; or contain non-populist factions despite being broadly populist, such as the Law and Justice party in Poland. Our new European populism index has the advantage of placing political parties on a scale of less to more populist.

As discussed, the essential feature of populism is its binarism: an insistence on dividing society into a duality between a righteous people and a corrupt, established elite. While an argument could be made for also including other ideological tenets within our populism index these would, first, be inevitably contentious and, second, add complexity to an otherwise easy-to-understand and focused measure. Consequently, this is what our European populism index measures: the extent to which a political party emphasises and promotes said binary. A detailed methodology is explained in the Annex.

The position of a selection of different non-populist and populist parties in different European countries on our European populism index is illustrated in Chart 2.1 below.

Chart 2.1. European populism index by party[61] in select countries, 2021 to 2024



Note: Selection of countries has been dictated by data availability.

results, such as marking the British Conservatives 4/4 on the populism scale and the British Greens only 1/4, perhaps due to the survey's definition of populism as the opposite of pluralism.

[60] Staniszewski et al., The right road.

[61] FPÖ: *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Freedom Party of Austria); RN: *Rassemblement National* (National Rally); FI: *La France Insoumise* (France Unbowed); AfD: *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany); CDU/CSU: *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands / Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern* (Christian Democratic Union of Germany / Christian Social Union in Bavaria); PiS: *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice).

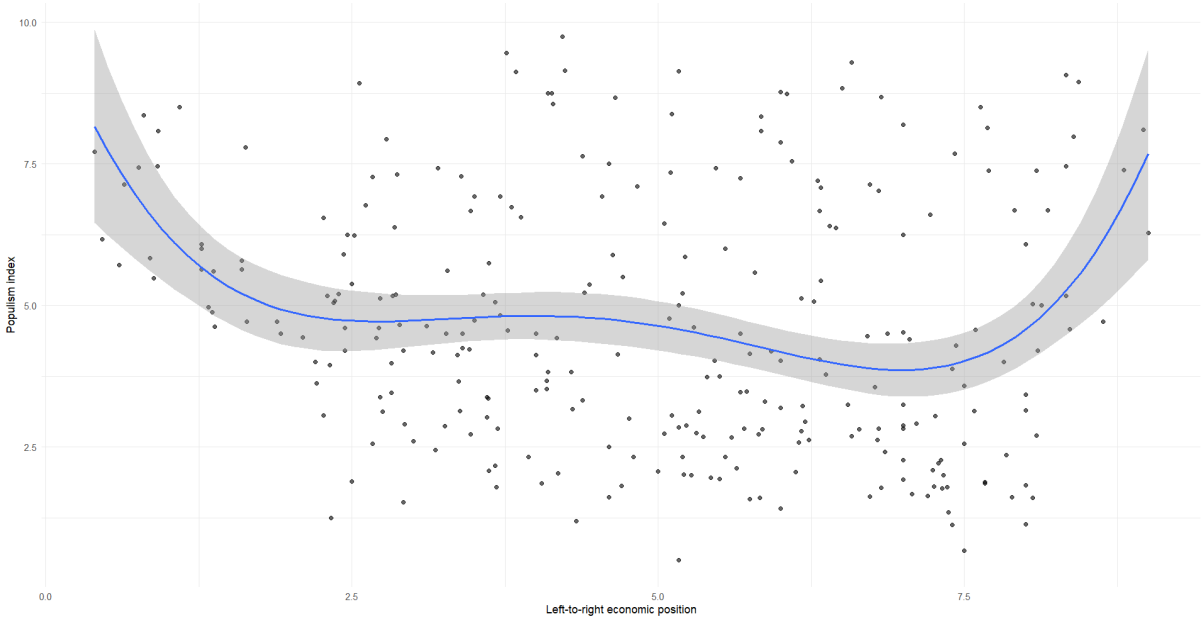
As Chart 2.1 shows, the German AfD scores 8.5 in our index, while the centre-left British Labour Party scores 2.08. Scores of a select group of political parties are also visible in Chart 2.1.

Having created this new European populism index, we also tested the attitudes of respondents to the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey on key economic and social positions of different more or less populist European parties on the European populism index.

What do European populist parties think about the economy?

Chapel Hill asked in 2024 about each party's "stance on economic issues … Parties on the economic left want government to play an active role in the economy. Those on the economic right want a reduced role for government," with '0' indicating extreme left or statist and '10' indicating extreme right or market-based views. The relationship between the results of that question and our European populism index is visualised in Chart 2.2 below, with each of the political parties identified by a dot. The line of best fit was produced using polynomial regression — a way of showing a non-linear relationship between any two variables, explained in more detail in the Annex.

Chart 2.2. Correlation between the European populism index and a left-to-right position on the economy



Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2024

As can be seen in Chart 2.2 above, populists are not united by a shared view on economics. Indeed, as can be seen in Chart 2.2, how populist a European political party is very poor at explaining its views on economics; and, vice versa, a European political party's views on economics are a very poor explainer of how populist a party is.

Conversely, populists can be both right-wing and left-wing on economic policy. With that said, a trend is evident: populists are more likely to adopt extreme positions on economics

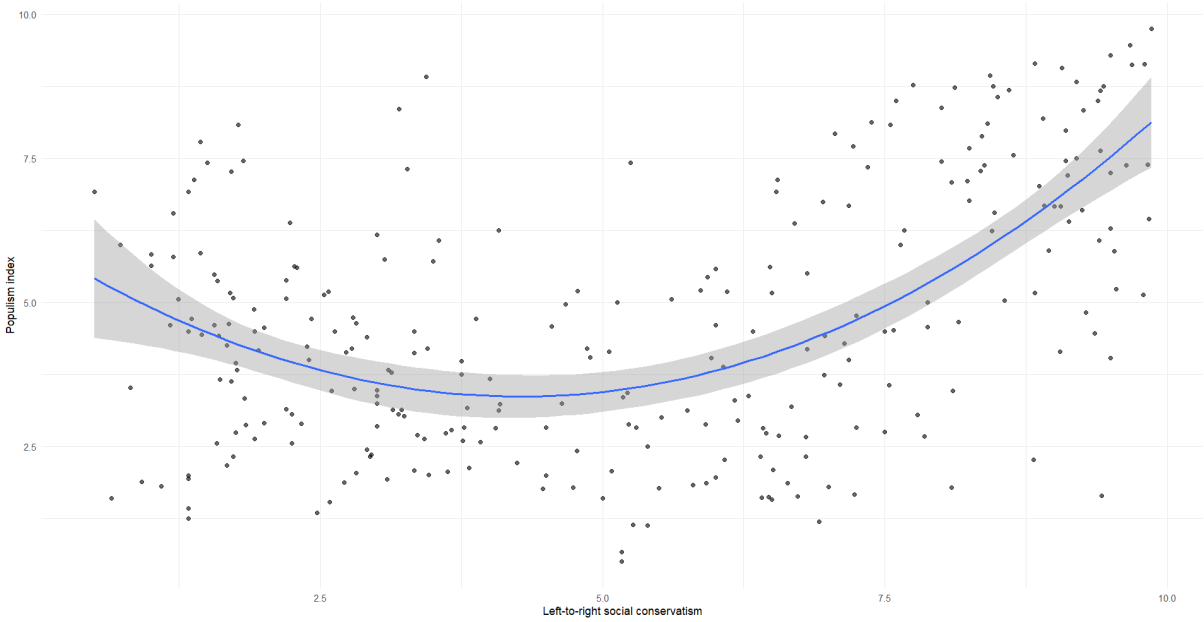
compared to non-populists. As Chart 2.2 above illustrates, parties on the most extreme right on economic issues (10 on the x-axis) rank at around 7.5 on the populism index; and parties on the most extreme left (0 on the x-axis) on economic issues rank at around 8.2 on the populism index. Conversely, parties in the middle (5 on the x-axis) of the economic spectrum score only around 4.7 on the populism index. The least populist parties tend to be centre-right on the economic spectrum.

So, as well as being binary about their view of people in a country, European populist parties also seem to be more binary in their thinking about the economy, believing in systems that are more absolutely statist or pro-market.

What do European populist parties think about social issues?

Chapel Hill also asked in 2024 about each party's "views on democratic freedoms and rights … [left-wing] parties favour … abortion rights, same sex marriage, and democratic participation … [right-wing] parties reject these ideas in favour of order, tradition, and stability, believing that the government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues" with '0' indicating extreme left or relativism on social issues and '10' indicating extreme right or moralism. The relationship between the results of that question and our European populism index is visualised in Chart 2.3 below, with each of the political parties identified by a point. The line of best fit was again produced using polynomial regression.[62]

Chart 2.3. Correlation between the European populism index and views on social issues



Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2024

[62] A more detailed methodology can be found in the Annex.

Although populists are often caricatured as very socially right-wing, this is not always true. The same story as about the economy can be told, albeit to a lesser extent, about European populism and social issues: populists, or at least the political parties that best represent them, are more likely to be either very left-wing or very right-wing on social issues, though they tend towards the right on social issues more often than they do on the economy.

As Chart 2.3 illustrates, parties on the most extreme right on social issues rank at around 8.1 on the populism index; and parties on the most extreme left on social issues rank at around 5.4 on the populism index. Conversely, parties in the centre on social issues score only around 3.4 on the populism index. The least populist parties tend to be centre-left on the social issues spectrum.

Clearly, our original data analysis has shown that the foundational definition of populism — namely, the binarism associated with the structure of society between people and an elite, who are in conflict —also applies to how populists, or at least the political parties that best represent them across Europe, think about economic and social policy, where they are much more likely than non-populists to support fully statist or fully market economies, and social relativism or social moralism.

Understanding populist voters

Having established the political parties that best represent populism through our European populism index, we now seek to unearth the types of people who are more likely to vote for populist parties.

Using the eleventh round of the European Social Survey, as described in Chapter One, and the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey, we examined over 11,000 voters across sixteen European countries — Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK — to find how support for a more or less populist political party correlates with various attitudes and characteristics of a voter. These attitudes and characteristics were chosen on the basis that each is either foundational or at least sometimes associated with a rise in populism in the wider academic literature and are listed in full in Box 2.1 below.

Box 2.1. Attitudes and characteristics tested in our data analysis

Characteristics:

- Gender
- Age group
- Education level
- Ethnicity
- Marital status

- Urban or rural residence
- News consumption
- Internet use
- Happiness
- Frequency of social meetings, including as compared to others
- Whether the respondent has been the victim of a crime within the last five years
- Whether the respondent feels safe walking alone after dark
- Religiosity
- Household income

Attitudes:

- Interest in politics
- Trust in people, parliament, the legal system, the police, politicians, political parties, the European Parliament and the United Nations
- The view that people can be trusted
- The view that people try to be fair
- The view that people try to be helpful
- The view that the political system currently allows the respondent a say
- The view that the political system currently allows the respondent influence
- Emotional attachment to one's country
- Emotional attachment to Europe
- How one feels about one's household's income

Table 2.1, below, presents our findings, in order from voter characteristics and attitudes most positively correlated with supporting a populist party to most negatively correlated with supporting a populist party. A more detailed explanation of the methodology can be found in the Annex.

Table 2.1. Voter characteristics and attitudes' correlation with populist parties identified in our European populism index

Row number	Characteristic or attitude	Pearson correlation with the populism index
1	Feels difficult about present household income	+0.14
2	Lives in a rural area	+0.08
3	Is male	+0.06
4	Feels unsafe walking alone in local area after dark	+0.06
5	Has been a victim of crime in the last five years	+0.05
6	Religious	+0.04
7	Emotionally attached to one's country	+0.01
8	Is part of the majority ethnic group in their country	0.00
9	Spends time watching, reading or listening to the news	-0.01
10	Meets other people	-0.01
11	Meets other people more than peers do	-0.01
12	Spends time using the internet	-0.04
13	Is old	-0.06
14	Has a high household income	-0.06
15	Married	-0.07
16	Has a high education level	-0.07
17	Interested in politics	-0.07
18	Thinks people try to be fair	-0.11
19	Is happy	-0.12
20	Trusts the police	-0.15
21	Thinks people can be trusted	-0.15
22	Thinks people try to be helpful	-0.15
23	Trusts political parties	-0.16
24	Trusts politicians	-0.17
25	Thinks the system allows one to have influence	-0.18
26	Thinks the system gives one a say	-0.20
27	Emotionally attached to Europe	-0.21
28	Trusts the United Nations	-0.22
29	Trusts the parliament	-0.23
30	Trusts the legal system	-0.27
31	Trusts the European Parliament	-0.29

As Table 2.1 above shows, the primary feature uniting populist voters is low institutional trust: whether that be — in particular — institutions such as the European Parliament (row 31), the national parliament (row 29), the United Nations (row 28) or the legal system (row 30), trust in each of which has a fairly strong negative correlation with voting for a populist party.

But populist voters also have particularly low levels of trust towards other people: they are much less likely than the average person to think that people generally can be trusted (row 21) or try to be helpful (row 22), suggesting a loss of faith in the social contract or low levels of social cohesion. In essence, they have quite a pessimistic or zero-sum mentality. In that sense, populist voters do not just feel betrayed by politics: they feel betrayed by society at large.

It is worth noting that these averages in Table 2.1 mask some significant outliers. In Poland, for example, voting for populists is strongly positively correlated with religiosity (+0.40) despite there being no correlation between religiosity and populism elsewhere in Europe (row 6); and trust in the police in Poland is likewise positively correlated with voting for populists (+0.24) where elsewhere in Europe there is no such correlation, or it is negative (row 20). This is likely because, in Poland, religion — and, specifically, Catholicism — is uniquely related to national identity in a way that is not as common elsewhere in Europe anymore;[63] and national identity is by far the most common framing used by right-wing populists to define the 'people' against the elite, as discussed later in this report. This is even though there is no correlation between emotional attachment to one's country and support for populism (row 7) in our data, perhaps reflecting the conflation of support for country with support for a country's establishment and government in anti-establishment populist discourse.

Also, uniquely in Spain, household income is positively correlated with populism (+0.17, see row 14 for comparison), perhaps reflecting the strong economic liberalism of Spain's main populist party, Vox; and uniquely in Latvia, being an ethnic minority is positively correlated with populism (+0.22, see row 8 for comparison), likely reflecting how the Russian ethnic minority in Latvia votes.

The general pessimism populist voters have with other people and society as a whole, seems to be a consequence of their mistrust in political institutions: mistrust of people at large falls significantly among populist voters once other attitudes and characteristics are controlled for. We can show this using multiple linear regression, as explained in more detail in the Annex.

[63] Matei Rosca, "Why we should be more like Poland", *Critic*, 17 December 2025 <https://thecritic.co.uk/why-we-should-be-more-like-poland/> [accessed 5 June 2026].

Table 2.2. Voters attitudes and characteristics' independent relationship with populist parties, as identified in our European populism index

Row number	Characteristic	Independent relationship with populism
7	Emotionally attached to one's country	+0.08
24	Trusts politicians	+0.08
3	Is male	+0.05
1	Feels difficult about present household income	+0.05
8	Is part of the majority ethnic group in their country	+0.05
9	Spends time watching, reading or listening to the news	+0.04
5	Has been a victim of crime in the last five years	+0.03
22	Thinks people try to be helpful	-0.04
25	Thinks the system allows one to have influence	-0.05
28	Trusts the United Nations	-0.05
15	Married	-0.05
12	Spends time using the internet	-0.05
29	Trusts the parliament	-0.08
26	Thinks the system gives one a say	-0.10
13	Is old	-0.11
31	Trusts the European Parliament	-0.11
27	Emotionally attached to Europe	-0.12
30	Trusts the legal system	-0.13

Worth noting here is that no single variable emerges as dominant: as we identified in *The right road*,[64] no single voter attitude or characteristic explains why people vote for populists. Rather, support for populism emerges in response to a soup of factors. Even low institutional trust, which is strongly correlated with voting for populist parties — as shown in Table 2.1 earlier — is unable to explain support for populism in the absence of the other factors included in our analysis, listed in Box 2.1 earlier. Rather, it is particularly strongly correlated with the other factors which might cause one to vote for a populist party.

Interesting is the swing in correlation between support for populist parties and trust in politicians between Tables 2.1 and 2.2. Once we control for all other variables, European populist voters are more, not less, likely to trust politicians than the average person. This would suggest that, while populists generally mistrust politicians, this is only a reflection of their mistrust of institutions such as the legal system, the European Parliament, the EU, national parliaments, and so on. For non-populist voters who also have the same level of mistrust towards political institutions as populists, their level of trust in politicians is lower.

[64] Staniszewski et al., *The right road*, 42-68.

This might reflect the fact that populists are more likely to trust non-institutionalised politicians, or at least politicians who present themselves as such.

Who abandons the centre-right for populism?

As mentioned in Chapter One, we are especially interested in the implication of the rise of populist parties for established centre-right parties. To examine this, we analysed the characteristics of voters who switch from voting for a centre-right party to a more populist rival — referred to here as 'switchers'. A detailed methodology of how we did this can be found in the Annex.

Table 2.3. Characteristics and attitudes of European voters who have switched from supporting centre-right parties at the last relevant election to populist parties

Row number	Characteristic	Average switcher	Average centre-right voter	Difference between switchers and centre-right voters overall
3	Is male	0.41	0.04	0.37
17	Interested in politics	0.62	0.36	0.26
2	Lives in a rural area	0.26	0.10	0.16
12	Spends time using the internet	0.02	-0.12	0.14
4	Feels unsafe walking alone in local area after dark	0.16	0.09	0.07
9	Spends time watching, reading or listening to the news	0.12	0.05	0.07
10	Meets other people	-0.04	-0.07	0.03
5	Has been a victim of crime in the last five years	0.01	0.02	-0.01
1	Feels difficult about present household income	0.18	0.21	-0.03
8	Is part of the majority ethnic	0.17	0.22	-0.05

	group in their country			
18	Thinks people try to be fair	0.11	0.16	-0.05
13	Is old	0.22	0.30	-0.08
23	Trusts political parties	0.03	0.11	-0.08
25	Thinks the system allows one to have influence	0.05	0.17	-0.12
7	Emotionally attached to one's country	0.11	0.24	-0.13
20	Trusts the police	0.02	0.15	-0.13
15	Married	0.18	0.31	-0.13
14	Has a high household income	0.04	0.19	-0.15
29	Trusts the parliament	0.02	0.18	-0.16
6	Religious	-0.06	0.10	-0.16
11	Meets other people more than peers do	-0.08	0.10	-0.18
24	Trusts politicians	-0.09	0.11	-0.20
22	Thinks people try to be helpful	-0.14	0.06	-0.20
19	Is happy	-0.01	0.20	-0.21
21	Thinks people can be trusted	-0.09	0.13	-0.22
16	Has a high education level	-0.03	0.19	-0.22
26	Thinks the system gives one a say	-0.10	0.16	-0.26
31	Trusts the European Parliament	-0.22	0.09	-0.31
30	Trusts the legal system	-0.24	0.09	-0.33
27	Emotionally attached to Europe	-0.14	0.21	-0.35
28	Trusts the United Nations	-0.28	0.11	-0.39

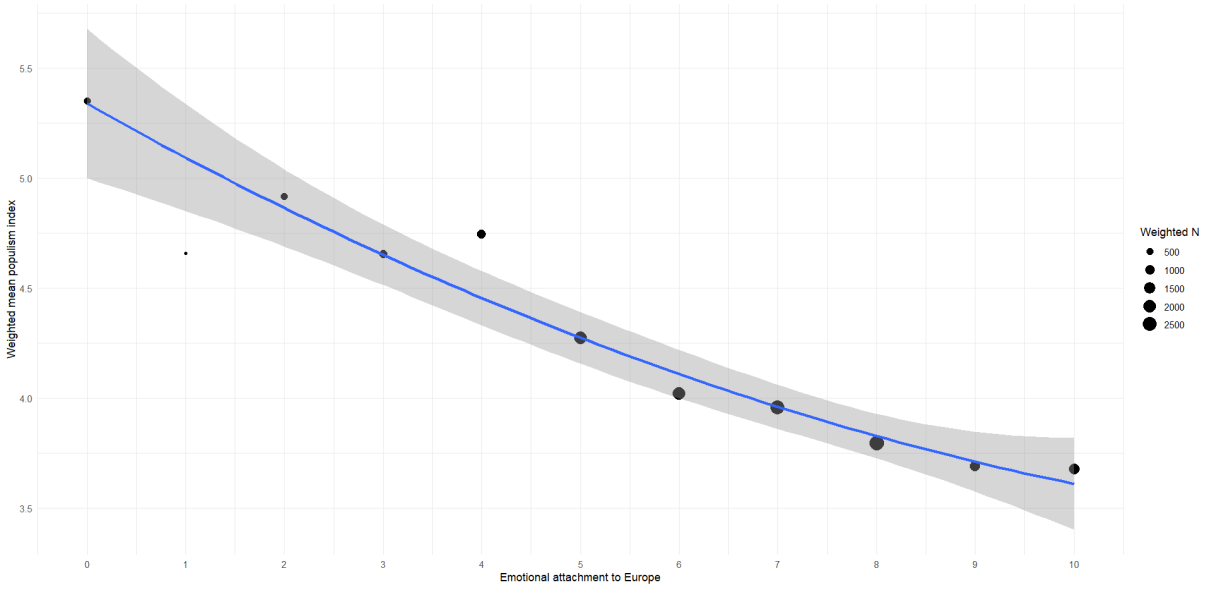
As can be expected, those who change their political allegiance are most likely to be interested in politics. Other major differences between European centre-right voters generally and

switchers include unwillingness to trust the UN (row 31), the European Parliament (row 28) or the legal system (row 29); lack of education (row 26); living in a rural area (row 3); lack of an emotional attachment to Europe (row 30); lower household income (row 18); unhappiness (row 24); lack of socialisation relative to peers of the same age (row 21); irreligiosity (row 20); and, most of all, being male (row 1). Due to the small sample size of switchers (161), other results should be treated with caution.

What emerges from all the above is that the one thread which unites European populism is Europe itself, or rather, scepticism to it: both to its institutions and to any emotional value it might hold.

This Euroscepticism most strongly and consistently correlates with a high score for a European political party in our European populism index, as illustrated in Chart 2.4 below.[65]

Chart 2.4. Relationship between support for a political party on the European populism index and emotional attachment to Europe



Source: European Social Survey 11.

So, with confidence, we can say that European populist parties and voters are more likely to demonstrate binarism in their thinking not just about a supposed ordinary people and established elite, but also about the economy and social policy. We can also say with confidence, from our analysis of voters of populist parties in Europe, that populist voters are overwhelmingly sceptical of established institutions, especially international ones and, in particular, of Europe.

[65] A detailed methodology can be found in the Annex.

Conclusion

Having defined European populism and the characteristics and attitudes of populist parties and voters in Europe, this report now moves on to examine the tactics and policies that have driven the success of European populist parties in recent decades.

Chapter Three: Key policies and tactics that have driven European populists' success

Having defined populism and illustrated the core beliefs of European populist parties and voters in Chapter Two, this chapter describes the leading policies and tactics that European populists employ.

The evidence suggests there are four key approaches employed by successful European populist parties, with the first two being policy approaches and the last two being tactical approaches. First, undermining existing elites and institutions. Second, defending the 'authentic' people's economic and cultural interests. Third, using alternatives to and attacking the mainstream media. Finally, charismatic and controversial leadership. Not all populist parties may adopt all four of these approaches, or, where they do, do so to an equal extent.

While both left- and right-wing populists are explored, the greater number and success of the latter, as well as the greater capacity for the centre-right to learn from them, means we focus primarily on them.

Undermining existing elites and institutions

As mentioned in Chapter Two, both left- and right-wing populists try to portray themselves as defenders of the people against an elite, both domestic and international. However, they do so in different ways. For the populist right, this tends to be criticism of the elite for their cultural attitudes and power; for the populist left, this tends to be criticism of the elite for their economic power. [66]

In the Netherlands, for example, the populist Party of Freedom, led by Geert Wilders, has regularly attacked political elites — he once described the country's parliament as "fake".[67] At the core of his criticism is the elite's failure to address what he perceives as the threat of immigration, especially from Islamic countries,[68] to the survival of the country's socially liberal traditions.[69] Reflecting his success, the Freedom Party emerged as the largest in the Dutch Parliament at the 2023 general election, winning 37 out of the total 150 seats.[70] Although the Party of Freedom lost 11 seats at the following 2025 general election, it remained the equal-

[66] Pedro Perfeito Da Silva, "Post-neoliberalism and external financial liberalization: Comparing left-wing and right-wing populism" *Government and Opposition* 58.3 (2023), pp. 535-55 (p. 539) doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.50
Marco Damiani, *Populist radical left parties in Western Europe* (Routledge, 2020); Giorgios Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis Alexandros (eds), *The populist radical left in Europe* (Routledge, 2019).
[67] Senay Boztas, "Offensive, hostile and unrepentant: Geert Wilders in his own words", *Guardian*, 24 November 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/24/offensive-hostile-and-unrepentant-geert-wilders-in-his-own-words> [accessed 20 July 2026].
[68] Ibid.
[69] Koen Damhuis, "Why Dutch populists are exceptional", Brookings Institution, 4 December 2019 <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-dutch-populists-are-exceptional/> [accessed 20 July 2026].
[70] Stijn van Kessel and Andrej Zaslove, "The Dutch parliamentary election – not quite a 'return to the centre'", LSE Blogs <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2025/11/05/2025-dutch-election-jetten-wilders-not-quite-a-return-to-the-centre-netherlands/> [accessed 20 July 2026].

largest party.[71] Another example from the populist right is the Sweden Democrats, which regularly accuses the country's establishment of failing to understand or act upon ordinary people's concerns, especially around immigration.[72]

A similar pattern exists on the left. For instance, as discussed earlier, in 2015, Syriza took power in Greece based on the strength of its opposition to the harsh terms of a proposed Eurozone bailout imposed by the EU.[73] In Spain, too, the far-left Podemos Party prospered due to a similar anti-austerity stance against the EU elite.[74]

Unsurprisingly, both the populist right and left attack established non-populist parties for being part of the same traditional elite. For example, aspects of both the British populist left and right brand the established Labour and Conservative parties as the "uniparty" on account of their perceived ideological similarities.[75] Such mainstream parties, populists contend, merely enact the same policies as each other regardless of which one is in power.

In some countries, notably Germany, such a critique is aided by the growing tendency of established parties to enter into cross-party coalitions.[76] In Germany, this has taken the form of grand coalitions between the established centre-left and centre-right parties, the CDU and the SPD. Whereas the Federal Republic only experienced one grand coalition between 1949 and 2005, there have since been a further four.[77]

Elsewhere across Europe, there has been a rise in cross-party coalitions that exclude populist parties. For example, after the 2011 general election, Finland was governed by a record six-party coalition whose members included both the established centre-right and centre-left parties — the National Coalition Party and the Social Democratic Party — but not the right-wing populist Finns Party.[78] Another cross-party coalition, comprised of five parties, was formed after the 2019 general election, this time again including the other established centre-right party, the Centre Party together with the Social Democratic Party.[79]

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[71] Stijn van Kessel and Andrej Zaslove, "The Dutch parliamentary election – not quite a 'return to the centre'", LSE Blogs <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2025/11/05/2025-dutch-election-jetten-wilders-not-quite-a-return-to-the-centre-netherlands/> [accessed 20 July 2026].
[72] Ernesto Dal Bo, "Economic and Social Outsiders but Political Insiders: Sweden's Populist Radical Right", *Review of Economic Studies* 90 (2023), pp. 675-706, https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdac037.
[73] Mark Lowen, "Greek debt crisis: What was the point of the referendum?", BBC, 11 July 2015 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-33492387> [accessed 18 May 2026].
[74] Kioupkiolis, "The case of Podemos".
[75] Aaron Bastani, "Labour and the Tories are becoming a uniparty", UnHerd, 18 August 2023 <https://unherd.com/newsroom/labour-and-the-tories-are-becoming-a-uniparty/> [accessed 28 May 2026]; Zia Yusuf, "The Tory-Labour uniparty has proved it will put British interests last", *Telegraph*, 1 January 2026 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2026/01/01/the-tory-labour-uniparty-has-proven-it-will-put-british-int/> [accessed 17 May 2026].
[76] Marco Morini and Matthew Loveless, "Losers together? Grand coalitions in the EU member states", *Italian Political Science Review* 51 (2021), pp. 404-18, doi:10.1017/ipo.2021.12.
[77] Alex Berry et al, "Bundestag elects Merz as German chancellor in 2nd vote", Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/bundestag-elects-merz-as-german-chancellor-in-2nd-vote/live-72443927> (2025) [accessed 28 July 2026].
[78] "Katainen named Finland's new prime minister", Al Jazeera, 22 June 2011 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/6/22/katainen-named-finlands-new-prime-minister> [accessed 20 July 2026]; Marco Morini and Matthew Loveless, "Losers together? Grand coalitions in the EU member states", *Italian Political Science Review* 51 (2021), pp. 404-18, p. 410 doi:10.1017/ipo.2021.12
[79] Stefano Fella, "Finland: Domestic politics and the Orpo Government since 2023", House of Commons Library, 13 February 2026 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10498/CBP-10498.pdf> [accessed 20 July 2026], pp. 5-6.

The Netherlands has also recorded two grand coalitions so far this century. After the 2006 election, two of the country's three established centrist parties, the centre-right Christian Democrats and the centre-left Labour Party, formed a Government together.[80] Similarly, after the 2012 elections, the centre-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy formed a coalition with the Labour Party.[81]

Reflecting the distrust in institutions outlined in Chapter Two, left- and right-wing European populists also direct their ire at existing institutions, both national and especially European. To populists, any institution that limits 'the will of the people', a term first coined by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau,[82] entrusting policymaking to unelected experts such as civil servants, non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) or the judiciary, becomes a prime target for populist ire.[83]

For example, the Hungarian Fidesz leader and former Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, referred to his 2010 election win as "the expression of the will of genuine people".[84] This, he felt, gave Fidesz the right to rewrite the country's constitution to fill the country's Constitutional Court, as well as formerly independent bodies such as the Media Council and National Election Commission, with party loyalists who would not seek to obstruct Fidesz's policies.[85]

Poland under the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party experienced something similar.[86] After securing an absolute parliamentary majority in 2015 — it remained in office until 2023[87] — it, like Fidesz, filled the country's Constitutional Tribunal with its own supporters, limited the powers of the country's Supreme Court and reduced the powers of the formerly independent National Broadcasting Council.[88] Such reforms were justified, Law and Justice claimed, because such institutions were controlled by "postcommunist elites" — a claim in Poland not without historical justification — whose obstructionism made it impossible to carry out the "nation's will" — namely the party's own programme.[89]

To populists, the sole legitimate source of authority and embodiment of the popular will is the populist entity itself.[90] As such, institutional constraints on the populist parties and governments, such as from courts or the civil service, are not seen as useful checks and balances, but as forces undermining true democracy.[91]

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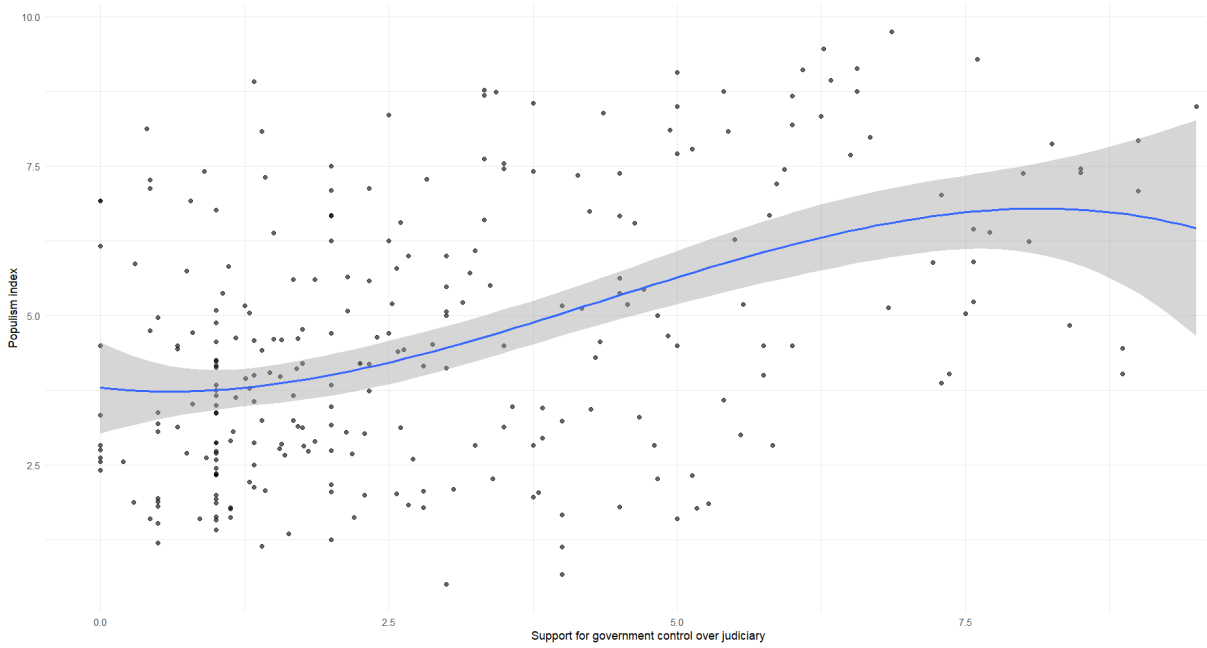
[80] Marco Morini and Matthew Loveless, "Losers together? Grand coalitions in the EU member states", Italian Political Science Review 51 (2021), pp. 404-18, p. 411.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Michael Rosen, "In a word: will (of the people)", *New Humanist*, 29 January 2020 <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/in-a-word-will-of-the-people/> [accessed 15 July 2026].
[83] Danny Kruger, "Fixing the centre: Proposals for the heart of Government", 24 May 2026 <https://preparingforgovernment.com/fixing-the-centre> [accessed 2 June 2026].
[84] Zoltán Szente, "The myth of populist constitutionalism in Hungary and Poland: Populist or authoritarian constitutionalism?", *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 21.1 (2023), pp. 127-55, p. 143 https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/moad014.
[85] Ibid., p. 144.
[86] Ibid., pp. 144-5.
[87] Stefano Fella, "Poland: The Law and Justice Government and relations with the EU, 2015-2023", House of Commons Library, 13 February 2024 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9868/> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[88] Szente, "Myth of populist constitutionalism", pp. 144-5.
[89] Christian Davies, "Hostile Takeover: How Law and Justice Captured Poland's Courts", Freedom House, 2018 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/analytical-brief/2018/hostile-takeover-how-law-and-justice-captured-polands-courts> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[90] Jan-Werner Müller, *What is populism?* (London: Penguin, 2017).
[91] Ibid.

As an example, our European populism index, derived from the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey, is clearly and positively correlated with party support for government control over the judiciary — an institution that can prevent a government from acting to uphold the rule of law, but is regularly attacked by populists. This is illustrated in Chart 3.1 below.[92]

Chart 3.1. Relationship between the European populism index and party support for government control over the judiciary



Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2024

As can be seen in Chart 3.1 above, support for government control over the judiciary is generally positively associated with populism, though the correlation becomes unclear at very extreme levels of populism, perhaps reflecting the anti-establishment, anti-government stance of very populist parties.

Populist attacks on elites are not just confined to the domestic sphere. Reflecting their growth since the Second World War, both left- and right-wing populists frequently attack international institutions and agreements, especially the European Union (EU), but also the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund[93] or the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), as shown in part in the last chapter. Indeed, our data analysis found that euroscepticism is a particularly pronounced feature of left-wing and right-wing populism. Because such organisations or treaties create binding limits on what member and signatory states can do, populists denounce them for undermining popular sovereignty and, by extension, the will of the people.

[92] A more detailed methodology can be found in the Annex.
[93] Davies, *Great realignment*, 74.

Hungary's Fidesz is perhaps the most electorally successful Eurosceptic party —it ruled the country for 16 years between 2010 and 2026.[94] While not advocating Hungary's withdrawal from the EU, Fidesz regularly sought to incite public anger against the so-called 'Brussels bureaucracy' and claimed the EU's foreign policy, support for Ukraine, asylum and LGBT politics were deliberate attacks against Hungary.[95]

The French National Rally's 2022 presidential candidate, Marine Le Pen, likewise included in her manifesto a lamentation that "immigration to France is mostly determined by the European Convention on Human Rights and by the jurisprudence of France's Constitutional Council, its Council of State [supreme court], the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights".[96] While she did not go on to win that year's election, she achieved a then-record 41.5% of the second-round vote.[97]

In Norway, too, which retains close ties with the European Union, applying most EU rules despite rejecting membership at a 1994 referendum,[98] its leading right-wing populist party, the Progress Party, has taken an increasingly Eurosceptic stance.[99] Although the Progress Party initially supported Norwegian membership of the EU, in 2016 it became the first right-wing party to oppose it publicly.[100] In common with other right-wing populist parties, a key reason for its hostility to the EU lies in its anti-immigration stance.[101] While at the most recent Norwegian parliamentary election in 2025, the centre-left Labour Party once again emerged as the largest party, with 53 seats in the 169-member Parliament, the Progress Party emerged as the second largest party, winning 48 seats — double the total for the established centre-right party, the Conservative Party.[102]

Left-wing European populists have also long criticised international institutions, especially financial ones. They blame these institutions for imposing 'neoliberal' economic policies — usually a pejorative term, but generally referring to policies that seek to apply free market principles across the public as well as private sectors[103] — that national governments cannot alter. Especially since the 2008 global financial crisis and subsequent Eurozone debt crisis, global institutions such as the IMF, the EU and the European Central Bank (ECB) have become

[94] Grégoire Roos, "Hungary election: Orbán has been defeated – but will Orbánism survive?", Chatham House, 14 April 2026 https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/04/hungary-election-orban-has-been-defeated-will-orbanism-survive [accessed 13 July 2026].
[95] Julia Pocze, "The EU vs Hungary: a 16-year battle with no winners", Centre for European Policy Studies, 9 April 2026 <https://cdn.ceps.eu/2026/04/2026-04_INST_HU-formatted-1.pdf> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[96] Ian Bond and John Springford, "What would President Le Pen mean for Europe? A manifesto for trouble", Centre for European Reform, 11 April 2022 <https://www.cer.eu/insights/what-would-president-le-pen-mean-europe-manifesto-trouble> [accessed 1 June 2026].
[97] Antonio Voce and Seán Clarke, "French election 2022: full second round results", 25 April 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2022/apr/24/french-election-2022-live-results-projection-second-round-emmanuel-macron-marine-le-pen> [accessed 1 June 2026].
[98] Nick Sitter and Ulf Sverdrup, "Norway's relationship with the EU", UK in a Changing Europe, 2 March 2026 <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/norways-relationship-with-the-eu/> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[99] Elena Baro, "EUPopLink Country report – Norway", 24 April 2026 <https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/articles/6-133> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Miranda Bryant, "Norway's Labour party wins election after seeing off populist surge", *Guardian*, 8 September 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/08/norways-labour-party-holds-narrow-lead-in-early-election-results> [accessed 21 July 2025].
[103] Kean Birch, "What exactly is neoliberalism?", The Conversation, 2 November 2017 <https://theconversation.com/what-exactly-is-neoliberalism-84755> [accessed 19 July 2026].

a target of left-wing populists who see them as enforcing fiscal austerity, a branch of neoliberalism, and so preventing the enactment of more radical left-wing economic policies.

There are multiple examples of this among European left-wing populist parties. For example, Germany's Die Linke opposed the SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's welfare cuts in the early 2000s, backed the introduction of a minimum wage[104] and blamed the "high concentration of capital in large corporations and banks" for the 2009 Eurozone debt crisis.[105] As discussed earlier in this report, Greece's Syriza also owed its electoral success to its opposition to the austerity measures imposed by its ECB creditors.[106][107] Slovenia's left-wing populist Left Party also emerged out of anti-austerity and anti-corruption protests,[108] but combined opposition to the country's membership of NATO with calls to restructure European institutions to prevent the external imposition of further austerity measures.[109]

Box 3.1. Lessons for the centre-right

While some of the populist critiques of existing institutions, such as the undermining of judicial independence in Hungary,[110] go against centre-right institutionalist thinking — which we outline in *The right road*[111] — centre-right parties can also learn from some of them.

Internationally, human rights institutions, such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), have failed to maintain sufficient flexibility, especially in enabling the offshoring and deportation of asylum seekers,[112] and thus facilitated a loss in public confidence in the state's capacity to function. Admittedly, both centre-left and centre-right governments across Europe have requested that the ECHR be reinterpreted to make it easier to process offshore asylum claims and remove failed asylum seekers.[113] Thus, in a characteristic centre-right manner, it sought to address a genuine populist grievance by incremental change rather than drastic rupture; though to successfully tackle populism, the centre-right must go further and faster, as we discuss later in this report.

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[104] David Broder and Julia Damphouse, "The Death of Die Linke", *Tribune*, 14 November 2024 <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2024/11/the-death-of-die-linke> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[105] Lazaros Karavasilis, "What's left of the populist radical left? SYRIZA and Die Linke compared", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 31.1 (2026), pp. 270-87, doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2024.2369904.
[106] Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, "Left-wing populism in the European periphery: the case of SYRIZA," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19.2 (2014): pp. 119–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.909266.
[107] Alexandros Kioupkiolis, "Late modern adventures of leftist populism in Spain: The case of Podemos, 2014–2018", in *The populist radical left in Europe*, ed. by Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupkiolis (Routledge, 2019), pp. 47-72.
[108] Alen Toplišek, "The Slovenian United Left: from protest to movement, and from movement to party", openDemocracy, 19 January 2017 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/slovenian-united-left-from-protest-to-movement-and-from-movement-to/> [accessed 16 July 2026].
[109] Ibid.
[110] European Parliament, "Parliament sounds the alarm over Hungary's deepening rule of law crisis", 25 November 2026 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20251120IPR31492/parliament-sounds-the-alarm-over-hungary-s-deepening-rule-of-law-crisis> [accessed 18 May 2026].
[111] Staniszewski et al., *Right road*, pp. 46-8.
[112] Matt Dathan and Bruno Waterfield, "Most European countries want to make it easier to deport criminals", *The Times*, 10 December 2025 <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/keir-starmer-europe-reform-echr-illegal-migration-xcqvw8lns> [accessed 2 June 2026].
[113] Diane Taylor, "Why rights groups fear new ECHR declaration could weaken migrant protections", *Guardian*, 15 May 2026 <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2026/may/15/rights-groups-fear-echr-declaration-weaken-migrant-protections> [accessed 15 May 2026].

Defending the 'authentic' people's economic and cultural interests

Populists typically present themselves as defenders of the 'authentic' people's economic and cultural interests.

On economic interests, support for generous welfare, pay and rights for those on modest incomes is a core feature of the European populist left.[114] Left-wing populist parties, such as the German Left Party,[115] Greek Syriza,[116] France Unbowed[117] or the Green Party in Britain[118] portray themselves as the defenders of ordinary people's living standards, working conditions and welfare protections.[119]

For example, the British Green Party has called for the nationalisation of water and energy companies, as well as the imposition of a 1% annual wealth tax for assets over £10 million.[120] Similarly, during the 2025 Bundestag election campaign, the German Left Party called for the introduction of a 1% annual wealth tax for personal fortunes exceeding €1 million, rising to 5% for those with personal fortunes over €50 million and 12% annual wealth tax on personal fortunes exceeding €1 billion.[121]

Recently, similar rhetoric has also become a feature of successful European populist right parties, but only for the native population. Unlike established centrist parties, many of which adopt policies that are fiscally restrictive, even right-wing European populists have tended to support maintaining generous welfare, pay and rights for those on modest incomes, at least for their own citizens.[122] A key argument deployed by right-wing European populists is that, by increasing competition for available jobs, large numbers of migrants undercut the local workforce and drive down its employment prospects, wages and working conditions. As far back as 1978, the leader of what was then the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, warned that "One million unemployed is one million immigrants too many! France and the French first!".[123]

Some right-wing populists directly link anti-immigration measures with ones to improve the rights of local workers. For example, the Polish Law and Justice party combined a fierce opposition to the EU's attempt in 2015 to take a share of predominantly Muslim refugees

[114] Mariana S. Mendes, "Left populism in office: the policy record of Podemos in Spain", *European Politics and Society* 27.3 (2025), pp. 541-55 https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2025.2605209.
[115] Dan Hough and Dan Keith, "The German Left Party: A case of pragmatic populism", in *Populist radical left*, ed. by Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, pp. 129-44.
[116] Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, "The case of SYRIZA".
[117] Ben Hal, Adrienne Klasa, and Akila Quinio, "Jean-Luc Mélenchon: the French left's divisive standard-bearer", *Financial Times*, 17 June 2024 <https://www.ft.com/content/3aa30c20-7fb7-4965-b2de-22d47d8740f0?syn-25a6b1a6=1> [accessed 19 July 2026].
[118] Green Party of England and Wales, "Creating a fairer, greener economy", undated <https://greenparty.org.uk/about/our-manifesto/creating-a-fairer-greener-economy/> [accessed 19 July 2026].
[119] Marion Reiser and Jörg Hebenstreit, "Populism versus technocracy? Populist responses to the technocratic nature of the EU" *Politics and Governance* 8.4 (2020), pp. 568-79 (pp. 571, 576) https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i4.3361.
[120] Green Party of England and Wales, "Creating a fairer, greener economy", undated <https://greenparty.org.uk/about/our-manifesto/creating-a-fairer-greener-economy/> [accessed 19 July 2026].
[121] Mark Hallam, "Germany's Left Party wants to halve billionaires' wealth", Deutsche Welle, 2 August 2025 <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-left-party-wants-to-halve-billionaires-wealth/a-71550347> [accessed 19 July 2026].
[122] Eatwell and Goodwin, "National populism", 70-1.
[123] Clément Guillou and Corentin Lesueur, "Far right wants to ban hiring a foreigner in case French candidate applies to same job", *Le Monde*, 22 September 2024 <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/09/22/far-right-wants-to-ban-hiring-a-foreigner-in-case-french-candidate-applies-to-same-job_6726861_7.html> [accessed 22 July 2026].

fleeing from North Africa and the Middle East[124] with policies like the doubling of the country's minimum wage[125] and limiting the maximum length of fixed-term employment contracts to three years.[126]

Indeed, moving away from more economically liberal views has tended to benefit major European right-wing populist parties.[127] For example, the Austrian Freedom Party, the French National Rally[128] and the German AfD[129] all recorded their strongest electoral performances after moving away from liberal economic policies.

For example, in the 1980s, while it was still known as the National Front, the National Rally championed a smaller, less centralised state, lower taxes, privatisation of state-owned enterprises and popular capitalism.[130] Reflecting the party's economically leftward shift, however, by 2024 it was proposing to lower the state pension from 64 to 60 — reversing President Emanuel Macron's recent reforms — indexing pensions to inflation and cutting taxes on energy from 20% to 5%.[131]

The Austrian Freedom Party has embarked on a similar shift. Whereas it previously called for, among other measures, patient contributions towards the cost of medical care and a larger role for private pensions to make the state system more financially sustainable, it subsequently rebranded itself as a supporter of the Austrian welfare state, at least for Austrian citizens.[132] At the 2024 Austrian federal election, for example, it called for, among other measures, larger annual pension increases and, more radically, the temporary introduction of price controls on food, rent and energy during inflation spikes.[133]

In Germany, the AfD pivoted away from economic liberalism in 2015, two years before its first major breakthrough in 2017.[134] When it was founded in 2013 by a group of economists, its policies focused on opposition to German membership of the Eurozone and German taxpayer-funded bailouts of indebted Eurozone members.[135] By 2025, however, the AfD was proposing

[124] "Why is Poland's Law and Justice party still so popular?", LSE, 1 October 2019 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/10/01/why-is-polands-law-and-justice-party-still-so-popular/> [accessed 22 July 2026].
[125] Anna Wlodarczak-semczuk, "Polish reforms under nationalist PiS government", Reuters, 19 September 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/polish-reforms-under-nationalist-pis-government-2023-09-19/> [accessed 22 July 2026].
[126] Jakub Tomášek, "The Welfare States of Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice: Explaining the Surprisingly Divergent Trajectories", LSE, April 2023 <https://www.lse.ac.uk/european-institute/Assets/Documents/LEQS-Discussion-Papers/EIQPaper181.pdf> [accessed 22 July 2026].
[127] Eatwell and Goodwin, "National populism", 70-1.
[128] Ibid,
[129] Frank Trentmann, *Out of the darkness: The Germans 1942-2022* (Penguin, 2024), pp. 547-5.
[130] Steve Bastow, "Front national economic policy: From neo-liberalism to protectionism", *Modern and Contemporary* France, 5.1 (1007), pp, 61-72, pp. 63-4, DOI:10.1080/09639489708456354.
[131] Liz Alderman, "Macron's rivals say they'll fix France's economy, but economists are skeptical", *New York Times*, 2 July 2024 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/02/business/france-economy-macron-national-rally.html> [accessed 2 July 2026].
[132] Laurenz Ennser-Jedenastik, "A welfare state for whom? A group-based account of the Austrian Freedom Party's social policy profile", *Swiss Political Science Review*, 22.3 (2016), pp. 409-27, doi:10.1111/spsr.12218.
[133] "Austrian political parties' plans for the economy", Reuters, 23 September 2024.<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/austrian-political-parties-plans-economy-2024-09-23/> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[134] Trentmann, *Out of the darkness*, pp. 547-8.
[135] Simon Franzmann, "A right-wing populist party founded by economists: the strange case of Germany's AfD", 11 March 2017 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/03/11/the-strange-case-of-afd/> [accessed 20 July 2026].

benefit increases and tax cuts that, according to the German think tank the Ifo Institute would have led to annual budget deficits of almost €155 billion.[136]

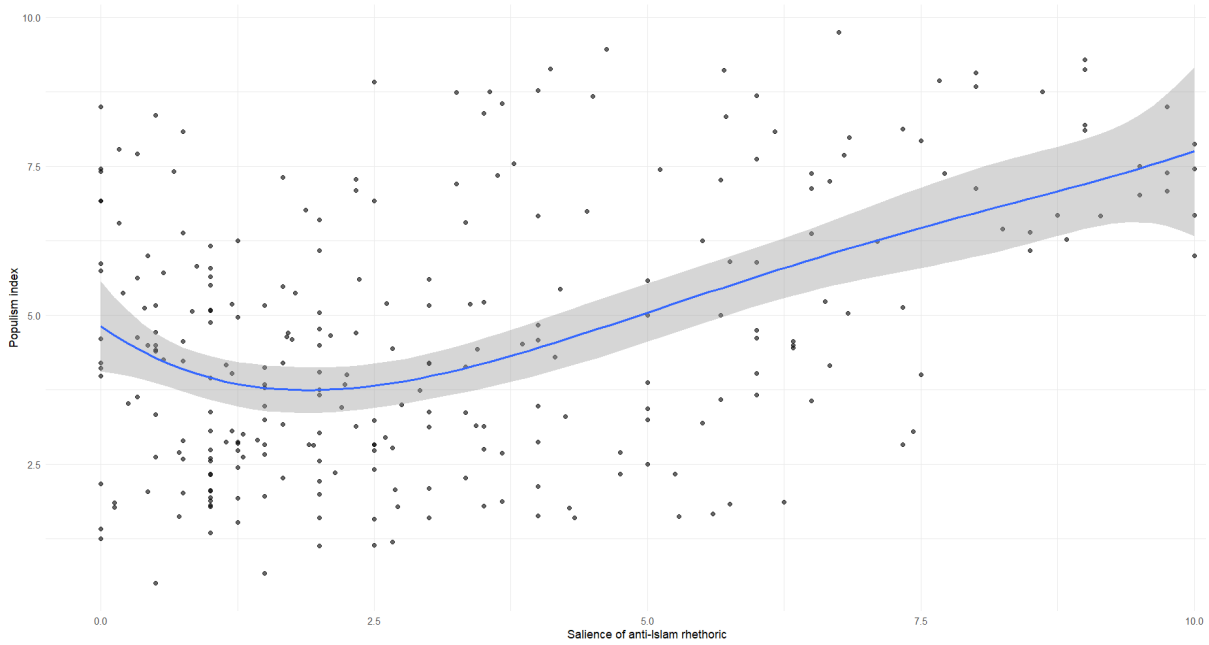
As shown earlier in Chapter Two, populist parties tend toward both left- and right-wing economic extremes. However, the most successful ones are not economically extreme ones. Indeed, when considering some of the more prominent examples of the populist parties which succeeded in entering government — the Polish Law and Justice, Hungary's Fidesz and the Brothers of Italy — they score respectively 2.5, 3.7 and 6.4 on the left-to-right economic spectrum in the 2024 CHES study, shown indirectly on Chart 2.2 much earlier.

Secondary evidence supports this thesis. For example, as Eatwell and Goodwin explain, while not the primary factor in right-wing European populists' success, it is notable that their support has grown among those from more disadvantaged socio-economic regions and backgrounds.[137] Thus, AfD support is strongest in the deindustrialised territory of the former communist East Germany,[138] and Reform UK enjoys some of its greatest strength in the UK's former industrial heartlands, such as the Midlands and northern England.[139] As noted in Table 2.1 earlier, there is a slight negative correlation between support for populism and household income, meaning that poorer households are more likely to support populist parties.

Unlike left-wing populists, and despite the lack of correlation between populism generally and national attachment, right-wing populists also portray themselves as defenders of the cultural interests of the native population. Opposition to mass migration, both legal and illegal, is the most common manifestation of this.[140] To right-wing European populists, having significant numbers of new arrivals, especially those from different cultures — notably Islamic ones, as shown in Chart 3.2 below — to that of the host country is a direct threat to the survival of the traditionally dominant ethnic group.[141]

[136] Bertrand Benoit, "Europe's Right-Wing Populists Swerve Left on the Economy", *Wall Street Journal*, 25 September 2025 <https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/europe-populist-right-wing-left-economics-eb7d3f9f?> [accessed 20 July 2026].
[137] Eatwell and Goodwin, "National populism", 179-222.
[138] Paul Millar, "How Germany's enduring East-West divide is pushing voters to the fringes", France 24, 24 February 2025 <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250224-how-germany-enduring-east-west-divide-pushing-voters-to-fringes-elections-afd-die-linke-migration> [accessed 6 June 2026].
[139] Richard Partington, "'They feel betrayed': how Reform UK is targeting votes in Britain's manufacturing heartlands", *Guardian*, 21 June 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2025/jun/21/they-feel-betrayed-how-reform-uk-is-targeting-votes-in-britains-manufacturing-heartlands> [accessed 6 June 2026].
[140] https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Towards-a-New-Order.pdf; Fenger, Menno. "The social policy agendas of populist radical right parties in comparative perspective." Journal of International and comparative social policy 34, no. 3 (2018): 188-209.
[141] A more detailed methodology can be found in the Annex.

Chart 3.2. Relationship between the European populism index and salience of anti-Islam rhetoric within the party



Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2024

As can be seen in Chart 3.2 above, anti-Islam rhetoric is generally positively associated with populism, though the correlation becomes negative at very low levels of anti-Islam rhetorical salience, likely reflecting the fact that extreme left-wing populists are particularly disinterested in anti-Islam rhetoric; even more so than non-populists.

In some cases, these concerns can take an explicitly racist form, such as when Hungarian Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán stated that he did not want Hungarians to become a mixed-race people.[142] Similarly, the Dutch Party of Freedom leader Geert Wilders complained that "[t]here is a lot of Moroccan scum in Holland who make the streets unsafe".[143] In an even more extreme case, the deputy leader of the Estonian right-wing populist Conservative People's Party remarked in 2013 that "[i]f you're black, go back".[144]

For right-wing populists, this is not just about defending cultural interests of ordinary people, but defending their economic interests, too. In place of high immigration, right-wing European populists instead propose a broad set of policies that, in their eyes, would allow the state better to utilise and protect the interests of domestic workers.[145]

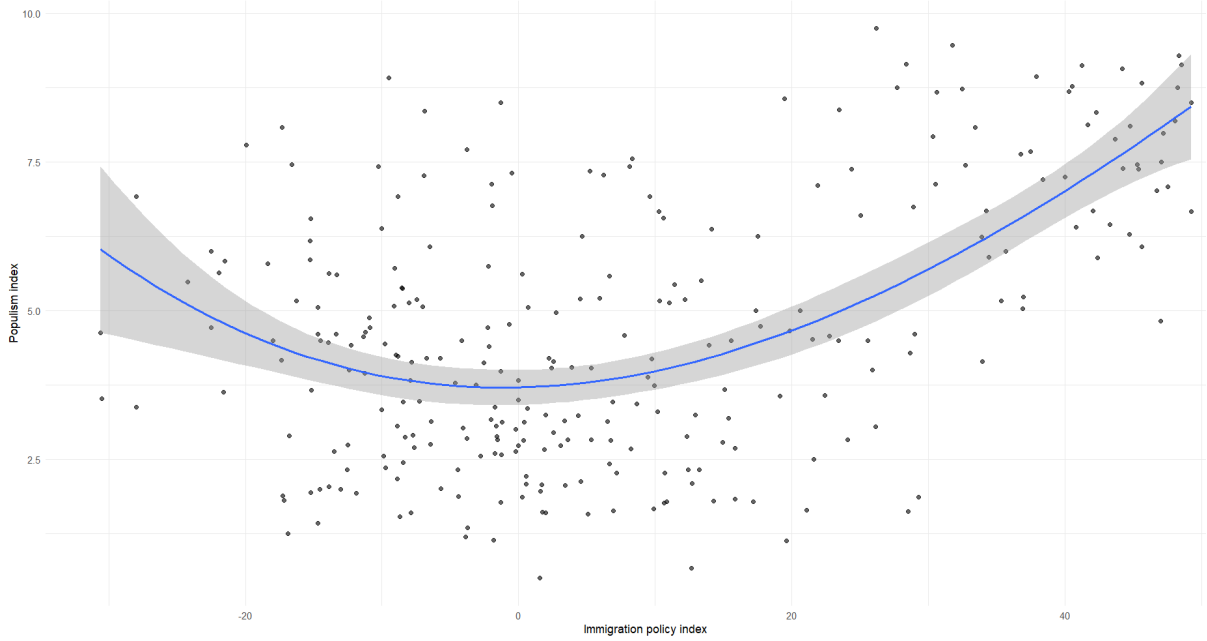
[142] European Parliament, 'EP leaders condemn Prime Minister Orbán's recent racist declarations', European Parliament News, 30 July 2022 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220730IPR36709/ep-leaders-condemn-prime-minister-orban-s-recent-racist-declarations> [accessed 14 May 2026].
[143] "Dutch populist Geert Wilders talks of Moroccan 'scum'", BBC, 18 February 2017 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39016179> [accessed 20 July 2026].
[144] Frank Suyak, "Far-right party deputy: 'We are the mainstream in Estonia'", Deutsche Welle, 13 March 2019 <https://www.dw.com/en/far-right-party-deputy-we-are-the-mainstream-in-estonia/a-47893557> [accessed 20 July 2026].
[145] Peter Hefele, 'Towards a New Order? The Economic Programmes of Right-Wing Populist Parties', Wilfred Martens Centre, October 2025 <https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Towards-a-New-Order.pdf> [accessed 13 October 2026].

For example, Reform UK has pledged to combine measures that improve the position of domestic workers — such as increasing employer National Insurance contributions on migrants whilst increasing the Personal Tax Allowance for Income Tax.[146]

Similarly, in Austria, the Freedom Party has argued that, by cutting immigration and removing access to welfare entitlements from non-citizens who, in its eyes, take more out of the system than they contribute into it, it can ensure that entitlements continue to be available for hard-working Austrians.[147]

Chart 3.3 below shows the relationship between the European populism index and a party's position on immigration, which is produced by where a party stands on immigration, with -5 favouring a maximally liberal position and 5 favouring a restrictive position, with the salience of immigration policy for the party, with 0 indicating minimal salience and 10 indicating maximal salience.[148]

Chart 3.3. Relationship between the European populism index and a party's focus and position on immigration



Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2024

As can be seen in Chart 3.3 above, the most populist parties are also the most restrictive on immigration policy, though the parties with the most permissive immigration policy are also more populist than parties close to the centre on immigration policy. This most likely reflects the fact that, while right-wing populists are particularly restrictive on immigration policy, left-wing populists are particularly permissive, with non-populist parties generally holding to a more moderated position.

[146] Paul Seddon, "Reform pledges new tax on hiring foreign workers", BBC, 15 June 2026 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czx5ne278x8o> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[147] Philip Rathgeb, "Makers against takers: the socio-economic ideology and policy of the Austrian Freedom Party", *West European Politics* 44 (2021), pp. 635-60, doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2020.1720400.
[148] A more detailed methodology can be found in the Annex.

This approach of right-wing populist parties of opposing mass immigration to protect the economic and cultural rights of existing populations has, for the most part, been electorally successful. As mentioned in Chapter One, the AfD enjoyed its first electoral breakthrough at the 2017 German Bundestag election, where its opposition to then-Chancellor Angela Merkel's asylum policies was its core message.[149]

In 2022, right-wing populist Brothers of Italy emerged as the largest party in the country's parliament, securing 26% of the vote.[150] Once again, opposition to immigration lay at the heart of its appeal. For example, its leader, Giorgia Meloni — now Italian Prime Minister — complained that "globalists" wanted to destroy Italian culture and once claimed that the EU and Italian political left were planning the "ethnic substitution" of migrants for Italians.[151]

In the Netherlands, as mentioned earlier in this Chapter, the right-wing populist Party of Freedom emerged as the country's largest at the 2023 general election after campaigning on an anti-immigration platform. While the Party of Freedom's leader, Geert Wilders, did not become the country's Prime Minister — the post went to a former intelligence chief, Dick Schoof — it still formed a coalition government and one of its MPs, Marjolein Faber, became Immigration Minister.[152]

Indeed, populist-right rhetoric and policies have incentivised even mainstream centre-left parties to take a harder line on immigration. For instance, centre-left parties in both Denmark and the United Kingdom have, in recent years, ended the rights of confirmed refugees to remain indefinitely as a part of wider efforts to deter would-be asylum seekers,[153] while the Polish Civic Coalition, despite running for election on a platform of easing access for refugees, instead proceeded to reinforce border controls after coming into office.[154]

In contrast to right-wing populists, as can be seen in Chart 3.3 above, left-wing populists — especially in countries with an imperial history — generally opt for a more liberal stance on immigration, the continuation of which they see as the embodiment, or a logical next step for national culture, rather than something at odds with it. For example, the leader of the populist left-wing France Unbowed, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, has spoken favourably about the

[149] Matthias Dilling, "Two of the same kind? The rise of the AfD and its implications for the CDU/CSU", in Erix Langenbacher (ed.), Twilight of the Merkel era: Power and Politics in Germany after the 2017 Bundestag election (London: New York, Berghahn, 2019), pp. 191-210.
[150] Paul Kirby, "Giorgia Meloni: Italy's far-right wins election and vows to govern for all", BBC, 26 September 2022 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-63029909 [accessed 21 July 2026]; Angela Giuffrida, "Italy elections: Giorgia Meloni hails 'night of pride' as exit polls point to far-right coalition victory", *Guardian*, 26 September 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/25/italy-elections-exit-polls-point-to-victory-for-coalition-led-by-far-right-giorgia-meloni> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[151] Stefano Fella, "Italy: 2022 general election and new government", House of Commons Library, 8 December 2022 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9629/CBP-9629.pdf> [accessed 21 July 2026], p. 22
[152] Anna Holligan, "Dutch government sworn in after Wilders election win", BBC, 2 July 2024 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd1r0xvn0z5o [accessed 21 July 2026].
[153] Miranda Bryant, "The UK wants to emulate Denmark's hardline asylum model – but what does it actually look like?", *Guardian*, 14 November 2025 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/14/the-uk-wants-to-emulate-denmarks-hardline-asylum-model-but-what-does-it-actually-look-like> [accessed 2 June 2026].
[154] See, for example, "Zapora na granicy polsko-białoruskiej. Oto jak Donald Tusk zmieniał zdanie ws. ochrony terytorium RP", Polskie Radio, 12 July 2022 <https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/2998672,zapora-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej-oto-jak-donald-tusk-zmienial-zdanie-ws-ochrony-terytorium-rp> [accessed 8 June 2026].

"Créolisation" of his country, by which he means that different cultures brought by immigrants will come together with the existing culture to form a new culture.[155]

However, reflecting Europe's growing division into 'cosmopolitans' and 'communitarians' — meaning the divide between those who favour and benefited from globalisation and those who do not and lost out[156] — other left-wing populists take a much harder line on immigration. One example is the socially conservative, anti-immigration German Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW),[157] which came within 0.02 percentage points of crossing the 5% threshold for Bundestag representation at the 2025 election.[158] However, at the time of writing, its momentum appears to have stalled, and it sits at just 4% in national opinion polls.[159]

Box 3.2. Lessons for the centre-right

There are aspects of what populists have done that the centre-right could copy. Not all aspects of the contemporary welfare state, especially pensions, are sustainable in Europe, considering the public debt and fiscal trajectory of many countries.[160] However, the idea of the state helping people to help themselves is a longstanding feature of both Christian democrat[161] and British Conservative thinking;[162] in other words, the centre-right have not always stood — and should not always stand — for cutting welfare entitlements.

For example, at the core of the post-war German welfare state was the principle of the social market economy. Introduced by the first West German Chancellor, the CDU's Konrad Adenauer, the social market economy expressly rejected either full state control or a laissez-faire economic approach.[163] Instead, the role of government was to enforce rules, break up monopolies and — most crucially — foster self-reliance, both through an insurance-based approach to welfare, but also ensuring that wages remained high enough for workers to sustain themselves, and their families, independently of the state.[164]

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[155] Aude Mazoue and Tracy McNicoll, "'Créolisation': Candidates clash on immigration, assimilation and identity", France 24, 15 February 2022 <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20220215-cr%C3%A9olisation-as-right-wingers-tout-assimilation-m%C3%A9lenchon-levies-creole-counterpunch> [accessed 17 July 2026].
[156] Céline Teney, Onawa Promise Lacewell and Pieter De Wilde, "Winners and losers of globalization in Europe: attitudes and ideologies", *European Political Science Review*, 6.4 (2014), pp. 575-95 https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773913000246.
[157] Nils Adler, "Not just AfD: What's the BSW, Germany's rising populist left party?", Al Jazeera, 25 September 2024 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/25/not-just-afd-whats-the-bsw-germanys-rising-new-populist-left-party> [accessed 18 May 2026].
[158] The Federal Returning Officer, "Bundestag election 2025" <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2025/ergebnisse/bund-99.html> [accessed 18 May 2026].
[159] Politico, "Germany — National parliament voting intention", 13 July 2026 <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/germany/> [accessed 19 July 2026].
[160] Luc Eyraud et al., "Europe's Fiscal Squeeze: Tackling Rising Spending Pressures", International Monetary Fund, 13 July 2026 <https://www.imf.org/en/publications/departmental-papers-policy-papers/issues/2026/07/09/europes-fiscal-squeeze-tackling-rising-spending-pressures-576826> [accessed 17 July 2026].
[161] Anthony Teasdale, "Centre-right politics decoded: Conservatism and Christian democracy in Europe today", in *Christian democracy, conservatism and the challenge of the extremes,* ed. by Klaus Walle and Federico Ottavio Reho (Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2025), pp. 111-27.
[162] William Prescott, The British Conservative Party and the state, 1929-1940 (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2020).
[163] Staniszewski et al., *Right road*, pp. 225-6.
[164] Ibid.

Similarly, the British Conservative Party has, throughout its history, favoured policies that, by improving workers' living conditions, lessen dependence on the state. For example, in the early postwar decades, Conservative Governments committed to maintaining full employment — that is, the idea that all workers who want jobs should be able to find one.[165] More recently, in 2015, the then Conservative Chancellor, George Osborne, unveiled a 'National Living Wage', gradually increasing the legal minimum hourly wage from £6.50 to £9 over a five-year period.[166] Along with simultaneous welfare cuts, the ambition was to move the UK "from a high welfare, high tax economy, to a lower welfare, lower tax society".[167] Like the German Christian Democrats, while Conservatives typically support the provision of welfare for those who need it, such provision should, where possible, be organised on a contributory or an insurance basis and, where that is not possible, it should be means-tested.[168]

Similarly with immigration. More overt racist language, such as that deployed in Orbán's Hungary, should be roundly condemned by the centre-right. Similarly, the evidence shows net zero migration to be undesirable.[169] For example, as a 2024 report from the Centre for European Reform pointed out, ageing populations mean that Europe will need to import new workers both to ensure the tax base remains strong enough to maintain existing welfare states and fill labour shortages.[170] Accordingly, the centre-right should argue against the populists for some limited, well-integrated and skilled immigration. Nevertheless, seeking to better control and moderate the pace of demographic change is entirely consistent with centre-right principles.[171]

Using alternatives to and attacking the mainstream media

Both right- and left-wing populists effectively target non-traditional media, where increasing numbers of voters are using as their main news source. In 2024, for example, the UK broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, reported that, for the first time, more adults were gaining news online (71%) than from television (70%). Of particular significance, the proportion obtaining their news from television declined by five percentage points in a year, while the proportion of adults obtaining news from social media increased by the same margin (from 47% to 52%).[172]

[165] Richard Wade, *Conservative Party economic policy: From Heath in opposition to Cameron in coalition* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 33.
[166] "Budget 2015: Osborne unveils National Living Wage", BBC, 8 July 2025 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33437115> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[167] HM Treasury, "Chancellor George Osborne's Summer Budget 2015 speech", 8 July 2015 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-george-osbornes-summer-budget-2015-speech> [accessed 21 July 2026].
[168] See e.g. Prescott, "The Conservative Party and the State".
[169] John Springford, "Europe must choose: Multiculturalism or stagnation?", Centre for European Reform, 9 May 2024 <https://mailings.cer.eu/insights/europe-must-choose-multiculturalism-or-stagnation#main-content-area> [accessed 17 July 2026].
[170] Ibid.
[171] Staniszewski et al., *The right road*.
[172] Ofcom, "TV loses its crown as main source for news", 25 September 20-24 <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/attitudes-to-news/tv-loses-its-crown-as-main-source-for-news> [accessed 28 July 2026].

The trend is similar across Europe. For example, according to data from the University of Oxford's Reuters Institute, the share of Germans getting their news from television declined from 82% in 2013 to 59% in 2026, while the share getting it from radio declined from 50% to 34%. During the same period, the share getting their news from social media increased from 18% to 36%.[173] Meanwhile, in Italy, the share of adults getting their news from television and radio declined from 74% and 34% respectively in 2013 to 62% and 14% between 2013 and 2026.[174] Conversely, the share getting their news from social media increased from 27% to 45%.[175]

As the media landscape has changed, populists have quickly adapted. For example, the French populist right dominates French social media. The National Rally's combined follower count on Instagram and TikTok is almost three times as large as the combined follower count of all other French political parties put together.[176]

Similarly, in the UK between 22 May and 17 June 2024 — that year's general election campaign — the Reform UK Leader Nigel Farage's TikTok account received 30% more engagement than that of the Labour Party, despite Labour having won that election handily.[177]

Left-wing populists are similarly able. A very early example was the Italian Five Star Movement, which is typically seen as a left-wing populist party.[178] Despite failing to gain much traction in traditional media and without access to significant financial resources, the party gained a strong online following and secured 25% of the vote in the 2013 Italian general election.[179]

More recently, the Leader of the Green Party of England and Wales, Zack Polanski, pivoted towards the greater use of social media following his election.[180] As he put it: "Nigel Farage has more TikTok followers than the rest of the MPs put together. If that's not a sign that this Labour government does not have a grip on media strategy, I don't know what is".[181] This pivot, which included more podcast appearances and pithy, short-form video content, quickly propelled the Greens in national opinion polls — within two months, Polanski had taken the Greens from 10%[182] to 16% in national opinion polls.[183]

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[173] Reuters Institute, "Digital News Report interactive", University of Oxford, 2026 <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/interactive#/?section=q3> [accessed 28 July 2026].
[174] Reuters Institute, "Digital News Report interactive", University of Oxford, 2026 <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/interactive#/?section=q3> [accessed 28 July 2026].
[175] Ibid.
[176] Staniszewski et al., *The right road*, p. 142.
[177] Carmen Aguilar García, Michael Goodier, and Pamela Duncan, "Nigel Farage outperforms all other UK parties and candidates on TikTok", *Guardian*, 26 June 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/26/nigel-farage-outperforms-all-other-uk-parties-and-candidates-on-tiktok> [accessed 28 July 2026].
[178] Ibid.
[179] Darren Loucaides, "Building the Brexit party: how Nigel Farage copied Italy's digital populists", *Guardian*, 21 May 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/21/brexit-party-nigel-farage-italy-digital-populists-five-star-movement> [accessed 28 July 2026].
[180] Rachael Healy, "Green party surging as Polanski's social media strategy woos the young", *Observer*, 2 November 2025 <https://observer.co.uk/news/politics/article/green-party-surging-as-polanskis-social-media-strategy-woos-the-young> [accessed 28 July 2026].
[181] Rachael Healy, "Green party surging as Polanski's social media strategy woos the young", *Observer*, 2 November 2025 <https://observer.co.uk/news/politics/article/green-party-surging-as-polanskis-social-media-strategy-woos-the-young> [accessed 28 July 2026].
[182] "United Kingdom — Parliament voting intention", Politico, 24 July 2026 https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/united-kingdom/ [accessed 28 July 2026].
[183] Healy, "Green party surging".

A similar story can be told about Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who in 2017 campaigned heavily on YouTube and Twitter, as well as promoting a satirical video game, "invit[ing] to take on the role of a cartoon version of Mélenchon, walking around and shaking money from the pockets of "oligarchs" to pay off the national debt".[184] While ultimately unsuccessful, Mélenchon enjoyed the highest first-round vote share in France of any candidate among voters between 18 and 24 years of age, with 30% of that cohort supporting him.[185]

While the easiest to analyse, social media is just one of several examples of populists being able to find voters where they already are instead of relying on the mainstream media.

For example, the right-wing populist President of Poland, Karol Nawrocki, who was elected in 2025, regularly posts videos of himself exercising at the gym to demonstrate his physical prowess, drawing associations between himself and manosphere creators — said videos get millions of views.[186] Similarly, Reform UK's Nigel Farage is regularly seen holding pints of beer to demonstrate his common man credentials.[187] Both play towards their audience — as shown in Chapter Two, centre-right switchers to populism in particular are very likely to be male.

Part of the stated reason for the focus on using alternatives to the mainstream media is a deep mistrust and hostility to traditional print and broadcast media, which they accuse of institutional bias against them and, by extension, against the interests of the authentic people.

For example, in its 2024 election manifesto, the right-wing populist Reform UK condemned the country's primary state-owned broadcaster, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as "the out-of-touch wasteful BBC" that was "institutionally biased".[188] Should it come to power, Reform UK has pledged to move its funding model towards an opt-in subscription service rather than a mandatory licence fee.[189] Reform is far from alone in this criticism. The French National Rally, for instance, accused its state-run television and radio channels of left-wing bias, and said they had "a clear problem with neutrality".[190]

Nor is the critique of traditional media confined to right-wing populists, with left-wing populists capable of equally strident criticism, and often for similar reasons. In 2018, Mélenchon, for

[184] Amien Essif, "French left candidate Melenchon buoyed by gaming community", Deutsche Welle, 19 April 2027 <https://www.dw.com/en/french-left-candidate-melenchon-buoyed-by-gaming-community/a-38401916> [accessed 28 July 2026].
[185] "Presidential election: the sociology of the vote", Public Sénat, 23 April 2026, https://www.publicsenat.fr/actualites/politique/presidentielle-la-sociologie-du-vote-59189? [accessed 28 July 2026].
[186] Aleksandra Galka Reczko, "Flexing muscles: Is physical fitness becoming a must for politicians?", Euronews, 22 October 2025 <https://www.euronews.com/2025/10/22/flexing-muscles-is-physical-fitness-becoming-a-must-for-politicians> [accessed 28 July 2026]. See, for example, PoperamyPMM, 'HIT! KAROL NAWROCKI POKAZAŁ SWOJĄ SIŁĘ!', YouTube, 30 June 2025 <https://youtube.com/shorts/K7mXsHPzG40?si=ZkDVFMvRWk_1viWs> [accessed 28 July 2026] or Maciej Wacławik, '"Trening z najsilniejszym człowiekiem na świecie". Nawrocki opublikował film', TVN24, 7 April 2026 <https://tvn24.pl/polska/karol-nawrocki-trenowal-z-mariuszem-pudzianowskim-wideo-st8986090> [accessed 28 July 2026].
[187] "Pint-swilling Nigel Farage wants to be savior of Britain's pubs", Politico, 2 February 2026 <https://www.politico.eu/article/reform-uk-nigel-farage-uk-pubs/> [accessed 28 July 2026].
[188] Will Hazell, "Farage wants to strip back the BBC if he wins power – here's how he would do it", *iPaper*, 18 December 2025 <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/farage-bbc-power-4113261?srsltid=AU7gw4X5tyX7OQExad8DffJeZlPFQLlNhw3r-YF_7fPx_7k_vs8gt9cX> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[189] Ibid.
[190] Jon Henley et al., "Can Europe's public service media survive attacks by the far right?", *Guardian*, 31 March 2026 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2026/mar/31/can-europes-public-service-media-survive-attacks-by-the-far-right> [accessed 8 October 2026].

example, described it as "the first enemy of free speech", one that "injects drugs into people's brains".[191] Even more colourful criticism came from the Prime Minister and leader of the Slovak left-wing populist Direction — Social Democracy party, Robert Fico, who remarked to journalists that "some of you are dirty anti-Slovak prostitutes".[192]

When in government, several populist parties have used this critique as a pretext for asserting control over both state and private versions of traditional media. For example, according to the independent not-for-profit Reporters Without Borders, Hungary's right-wing populist Fidesz, in addition to seizing control of the country's Media Council, collaborated with government-friendly businessmen to take effective control of private media outlets, leaving it running 80% of the combined state- and privately-owned total.[193] Similarly, in Poland, the right-wing populist Law and Justice-led government stacked state media outlets with supporters and loyalists.[194]

Box 3.3. Lessons for the centre-right

Once again, there are aspects of this tactic from which established European centre-right parties can learn. Clearly, if traditional media continues to decline, established centre-right parties will have to adapt to the new media landscape and produce more of the short-form content that increasingly drives clicks and views.[195] The centre-right could also do more to meet voters where they already are instead of expecting them to seek out political news. Where potential voters are interested in non-political topics, such as weightlifting — as in the case of Nawrocki — pubs — as in the case of Farage — or any other area where a centre-right politician can express authentic interest and commitment, there is no reason for said politician to limit themselves to strictly political content and outlets. Many votes could be won by politicians appearing on and producing authentic and appealing non-political content in otherwise popular areas.

At the same time, however, this requires genuine authenticity which long-serving politicians often lack due to their commitment to politics. Forced or failed attempts to appear authentic backfire and only deepen the perceptions of a party as out-of-touch, with one notorious example being the then-Prime Minister, David Cameron, being unable to correctly name the football club he supports during a speech in 2015 while attempting to demonstrate authenticity by talking about football in the first place.[196] Moreover, while it may prove tempting to blame

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[191] "Mélenchon's ever-growing guerrilla war against the media", Reporters without Borders, 23 October 2018 <https://rsf.org/en/m%C3%A9lenchon-s-ever-growing-guerrilla-war-against-media> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[192] Lucia Virostkova, "Why Slovak PM called journalists 'dirty prostitutes'", EUobserver, 24 November 2016 https://euobserver.com/57142/why-slovak-pm-called-journalists-dirty-prostitutes/ [accessed 8 October 2026].
[193] Henley et al., "Can Europe's public service media survive".
[194] Monika Scislowska, "Poland's new Cabinet moves to free state media from previous government's political control", *Independent*, 20 December 2023 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/donald-tusk-ap-cabinet-poland-law-and-justice-b2467520.html> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[195] Kineree Shah, "How short-form video on social media is impacting TV viewership in 2026", YouGov, 12 March 2026 <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54298-how-short-form-video-on-social-media-is-impacting-tv-viewership-in-2026> [accessed 28 July 2026].
[196] BBC, 'Election 2015: Cameron 'brain fade' over West Ham/Aston Villa support', BBC, 25 April 2015 <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-2015-32463038> [accessed 28 July 2026].

various forms of the media for their political difficulties, excessively attacking it is unlikely to turn the centre-right's fortunes around. Finally, while there may on occasion be legitimate reasons to critique the impartiality and performance of public broadcasters,[197] attempting to stack such bodies with loyalists would set a terrible precedent, especially in countries that have not yet experienced populist governments.

Charismatic and controversial leadership

As discussed earlier in Chapter Two, another common tactic used by both left- and right-wing populist leaders is charismatic and effective leadership. Indeed, as also mentioned in Chapter Two, political scientists such as Kurt Weyland argue that "the role of personalistic, plebiscitarian leadership" is central to any definition of populism.[198] However, it should once again be stressed that this is not characteristic of all populist parties at all times.

Many of Europe's right-wing populist parties first emerged around a strong leader. In the UK, as mentioned, Nigel Farage was central to the political breakthroughs first of UKIP, then of the Brexit Party and, most recently, of Reform UK.[199]

Similarly, in the Netherlands, the first right-wing populist to achieve a major national breakthrough was Pim Fortuyn, the charismatic leader of the eponymous anti-immigration Fortuyn's List party.[200] Although his career was cut short by his assassination in 2002, his influence is evident both in the 17% of the vote his party secured in the election shortly afterwards, and the fact the party soon collapsed shortly thereafter.[201] More recently, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the even more controversial but charismatic Geert Wilders has come to occupy the same niche in Dutch politics as did Fortuyn.[202]

While fewer in number, several left-wing European populist parties also emerged around a single, charismatic leader. For example, Alexis Tsipras's charisma, which he used to rally the Greek electorate against the punishing demands of its EU creditors, was a key factor in Syriza's rise,[203] which was explored in Chapter One. Similarly, the charismatic leadership of Pablo Iglesias was a key factor in the Spanish left-wing populist party, Podemos's rise to

[197] Gordon Rayner "Revealed: The devastating memo that plunged the BBC into crisis", *Telegraph*, 6 November 2025 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/11/06/read-devastating-internal-bbc-memo-in-full/> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[198] Weyland, "A Political-Strategic Approach", p. 51.
[199] Ben Quinn, "Nigel Farage: A potted history of his political career on the road to Reform", *Guardian*, 3 June 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/03/nigel-farage-a-potted-history-of-his-political-career-on-the-road-to-reform> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[200] Jacques Paulus Koenis, "A history of Dutch populism, from the murder of Pim Fortuyn to the rise of Geert Wilders", the Conversation, 14 March 2017 <https://theconversation.com/a-history-of-dutch-populism-from-the-murder-of-pim-fortuyn-to-the-rise-of-geert-wilders-74483> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[201] Ibid.
[202] Koenis, "A history of Dutch populism".
[203] Leo Cendrowicz, "Alexis Tsipras profile: A charismatic gambler with his nation's future", *Independent*, 3 July 2015 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/alexis-tsipras-profile-a-charismatic-gambler-with-his-nation-s-future-10365515.html> [accessed 9 October 2026].

prominence,[204] which was outlined in Chapter One. As with Greece's Tsipras, Iglesias effectively deployed this charisma to portray himself as the defender of the people's economic interests, albeit in this case against a corrupt, selfish domestic elite.[205]

Other populist leaders either took over or inherited existing parties. For example, Marine Le Pen of the French National Rally, as previously mentioned, took over as party leader from her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in 2011.[206] While the dynastic connection helped secure the party leadership, the younger Le Pen's natural charisma was a key factor in detoxifying the National Front/Rally's image while maintaining a strong anti-immigration message.[207]

Other populist parties gained prominence under a charismatic leader but have survived and thrived even after the initial charismatic leader departed. For example, the Austrian Freedom Party first entered government under the charismatic leadership of Jörg Haider, who led the party between 1986 and 2000.[208] However, as mentioned in Chapter One, the party recorded its strongest-ever results in 2024,[209] under its current leader, Herbert Kickl (2021-), who was traditionally seen as more of a behind-the-scenes operator and lacking the charisma of his predecessors.[210]

Similarly, the charismatic de facto leader of the Swiss right-wing populist Swiss People's Party was instrumental in lifting his party's support from 12% in the 1991 elections for the country's lower house, the National Council, to 29% by 2007.[211] Like the Haider, Christoph Blocher was "a controversial figure",[212] whose party styled itself the defender of the country's independence from both the European Union and, in its eyes, too much immigration.[213] However, like the Freedom Party, the Swiss People's Party has continued to prosper even after Blocher largely withdrew from frontline politics after failing to be re-elected to the country's Cabinet, the Federal Council, in 2007.[214] At the most recent elections, in 2023, the Swiss

[204] Giles Tremlett, "Despite his early exit, Pablo Iglesias radically reshaped Spanish politics", *Guardian*, 6 May 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/06/exit-pablo-iglesias-spanish-politics-podemos-spain> [accessed 9 October 2026].
[205] Giles Tremlett, "The Podemos revolution: how a small group of radical academics changed European politics", *Guardian*, 31 March 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/31/podemos-revolution-radical-academics-changed-european-politics> [accessed 9 October 2026].
[206] "Marine Le Pen says she 'will never forgive' herself for expelling father from party", *Le Monde*, 13 January 2025 <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2025/01/13/marine-le-pen-says-she-will-never-forgive-herself-for-expelling-father-from-party_6737000_5.html> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[207] Yasmine Ryan, "Profile: Marine Le Pen", Al Jazeera, 20 April 2012 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2012/4/20/profile-marine-le-pen> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[208] Austria's accidental hard-right leader, *Economist*, 11 April 2024 <https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/04/11/austrias-accidental-hard-right-leader> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[209] Mercedes Ruehl, "Austrian centrist parties agree to form government without far right", *Financial Times*, 27 <February 2025 https://www.ft.com/content/8a512398-f1a0-4b8d-af54-0599225d7845?syn-25a6b1a6=1> [accessed 30 June 2026].
[210] David Ehl, "Austria: Herbert Kickl's rise to 'People's Chancellor'", Deutsche Welle, 1 August 2025 <https://www.dw.com/en/austria-herbert-kickls-rise-to-peoples-chancellor/a-71242579> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[211] Toby Vogel, "The Swiss body politic, without its lifeblood", Politico, 9 September 2009 <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-swiss-body-politic-without-its-lifeblood/> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[212] Ralph Atkins, "Christoph Blocher: 'The Swiss have to stay out of the EU'", *Financial Times*, 13 July 2018 <https://www.ft.com/content/6f724758-7ecf-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d?syn-25a6b1a6=1> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[213] Balz Rigendinger, "Christoph Blocher's final speech to the Swiss People's Party", SWI swissinfo, 30 January 2024 <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/christoph-blocher-s-final-speech-to-the-swiss-people-s-party/49166324> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[214] "Weekend profile: Christoph Blocher, the controversial billionaire fighting for Swiss neutrality", *Economist*, 27 September 2026 <https://www.economist.com/the-world-in-brief/2026/09/27/4bf33947-c3a3-4290-9e2c-28852152b78b> [accessed 8 October 2026].

People's Party once again recorded 29% of the vote, making it the largest in the National Council.[215]

Box 3.4. Lessons for the centre-right

Of the four approaches commonly used by both left-and right-wing populists, this is possibly the most difficult for centre-right parties to learn from and adapt to.

On the one hand, it virtually goes without saying that ineffective, uncharismatic leadership can seriously imperil the political fortunes of established centre-right parties. For example, the current record-low approval ratings for current centre-right German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz — 13% according to one September 2026 poll — are in turn dragging down the approval ratings for the Christian Democrats,[216] which as mentioned in Chapter One, are currently averaging just 19% in national opinion polls.[217] Part of the reason for this unpopularity, as Deutsche Welle recently pointed out, is "his communication style, which frequently alienates his audience".[218]

Conversely, choosing charismatic, populist-lite leaders can, in the short term, deliver for centre-right parties. Most notably, and perhaps uniquely successfully, the charismatic British Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who portrayed "himself, and the Conservative Party, as the standard bearer for the silent counter-revolution symbolised by Brexit",[219] was rewarded at the 2019 general election with an 80-seat majority — its largest election win in over 30 years.[220] His subsequent claim to represent "the people's government"[221] also strongly echoed the typical populist claim to defend the authentic people's interests.

On the other hand, choosing effective and charismatic leaders for their own sake risks creating more problems than it solves. First, an overreliance on a single leader can risk the long-term stability of any party, centre-right or otherwise. Although the Swiss People's Party and the Austrian Freedom Party have both successfully moved on from Blocher and Haider respectively, Fortuyn's List disappeared shortly after its leader was forcibly removed from the scene.

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[215] "Anti-immigration SVP secures gains in Swiss elections", Deutsche Welle, 22 October 2023 <https://www.dw.com/en/anti-immigration-svp-secures-gains-in-swiss-elections/a-67179113> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[216] Jens Thurau, "Germany: Is it possible to replace the chancellor?", Deutsche Welle, 9 September 2026 <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-chancellor-friedrich-merz-cdu-resignation-vote-no-confidence/a-79313623> [accessed 8 October 2026].
[217] "Germany — National parliament voting intention", Politico.
[218] Thurau, "Germany: Is it possible to replace the chancellor".
[219] Richard Hayton, "The United Kingdom: The Conservatives and their competitors in the post-Thatcher era", in *Riding the populist wave: Europe's mainstream right in crisis*, ed. by Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 269-89, p. 287.
[220] John Curtice, "What's behind the Conservative victory?", UK in a Changing Europe, 13 December 2019 <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/whats-behind-the-conservative-victory/> [accessed 9 October 2026]; David Jeffrey, "Who's left? The composition of the new parliamentary Conservative Party", UK in a Changing Europe, 17 July 2024 <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/whos-left-the-composition-of-the-new-parliamentary-conservative-party/> [accessed 9 October 2026].
[221] Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, "PM statement in Downing Street: 13 December 2019", 13 December 2019 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-in-downing-street-13-december-2019> [accessed 9 October 2026].

Even when the party leader remains in place, as the UK's Nigel Farage illustrates, a strong leader does not guarantee a strong party, or a strong alternative government. His personality and ability to channel discontent against the political and media establishment have undoubtedly helped to propel his party into a poll lead. However, a series of financial scandals[222] and regular fallings out with underlings have both partially dented Reform's appeal — having fallen from an average of 30% in national opinion polls in November 2025 to just 22% by October 2026[223] — and raised doubts about its capacity to govern. Moreover, the subsequent collapse of the Johnson premiership so soon after his 2019 landslide victory — his own party ousted him in 2022[224] — should also provide a cautionary tale for centre-right parties seeking to rely on a charismatic or controversial leader to revive their flagging political fortunes.[225]

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the key polices and tactics behind the success of some populists in Europe. We have touched upon it briefly in this chapter, but the next chapter will consider which populist polices and tactics could and should be adopted by European centre-right parties to help revive their electoral fortunes and which ones should be rejected to develop an alternative approach which can be successful.

[222] Rachel Rees and David Sheppard, "The five financing scandals facing Reform", *Financial Times*, 4 September 2026 <https://www.ft.com/content/042639e8-89d9-4fe6-9b99-73bf2937a700?syn-25a6b1a6=1> [accessed 9 October 2026].
[223] "United Kingdom — Parliament voting intention", Politico, 5 October 2026 <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/united-kingdom/> [accessed 9 October 2026].
[224] Steven Swinford et al., "In the end Johnson realised there was no way out. It was an onslaught", *The Times*, 8 July 2022 <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/in-the-end-johnson-realised-there-was-no-way-out-it-was-an-onslaught-dq9km9c9z> [accessed 9 October 2026].
[225] See Tim Shipman, *Out: How Brexit got done and the Tories were undone* (William Collins, 2024).

Chapter Four: Recommendations for new policies and tactics for the European centre-right

The last chapter outlined the leading policies and tactics used by populists, especially but not exclusively on the political right, across Europe. Flowing from this, this chapter will recommend new priorities, principles, policies and tactics for the European centre-right to adopt that both learn from and challenge populists. These recommendations will be developed in response to the dominant attitudes of populist voters as outlined in Chapter Two, and our analysis of the leading policies and tactics used by European populist parties that we outlined in Chapter Three.

The three priorities for the centre-right we have recommended in tackling populism are: people, prosperity, and participation. These priorities have been chosen, as explained in greater detail below, because they both respond to the leading policy and tactical approaches of populists, but also flow from key centre-right beliefs.

Each priority includes recommended principles, policies and tactics for centre-right parties across Europe to adopt, to both properly tackle genuine grievances that populists are campaigning on, but also to differentiate the centre-right both from populists and the centre-left in their policy and tactical approaches.

Priority one: People

The centre-right believes that people living in a particular nation should be prioritised by policymakers; this is non-cosmopolitanism, a key principle of the European centre-right, as we elucidated in Bright Blue's previous report, *The right road*.[226] Populists take this further. As mentioned in Chapter Two, underlying almost all European populist movements is an insistence that the people in a nation are divided into a binary between a righteous people and a corrupt elite.

In particular, a key way that European right-wing populists express this is on immigration, by portraying themselves as the defenders of their respective populations' economic and cultural interests. Opposition to immigration is a key policy for right-wing populists across Europe, one which has played a major role in their growing electoral success.[227] After decades of mass migration, only by achieving net-zero immigration and ending the right to asylum, runs the argument, can the interests and identity of the native population now be guaranteed.

[226] Staniszewski et al., *Right road*, pp. 58-9.
[227] Tara Varma and Sophie Roehse, "Understanding Europe's turn on migration", 24 October 2024 <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-europes-turn-on-migration/> [accessed 23 July 2026].

Indeed, in several European countries, including France,[228] Germany, the Netherlands,[229] Sweden,[230] and the UK, immigration has reached record levels under recent centre-right-led governments.[231] Even in countries with relatively low rates of immigration, such as Hungary[232] and Poland,[233] the fear that mass migration might happen has itself been deployed as a political weapon by right-wing populists.[234]

Especially since the 2015 refugee crisis, during which over a million people, mostly from Syria but also other parts of the Middle East, arrived in Europe,[235] immigration has emerged as a top issue of concern among European voters. For example, according to YouGov, 28% of French voters viewed immigration as one of the two biggest problems facing the country in February 2017, while 27% did so in March 2026 — the earliest and latest datapoint available — and it rarely dropped out of the top three biggest issues during that time.[236]

In other countries, the salience of immigration as an issue of concern has fluctuated along with perceptions of government action to reduce it. For example, according to Ipsos polling data, in September 2015, 56% of British voters saw immigration either as an issue of concern or the issue of greatest concern, which was some 20 percentage points above the second placed issue, the NHS.[237]

After the country's Brexit vote, and a likely perception that immigration would be reduced because of it, that number gradually fell, until it reached just 5% in April 2020, meaning that it fell outside the top ten most important issues.[238] However, as net migration surged post-COVID — hitting a peak of 944,000 in the year ending March 2023 — thanks to a combination of liberalised rules for non-EU migrants, special visas for Hong Kongers and Ukrainians an

[228] Tony Todd, "Left slams Sarkozy's 'too many foreigners' claim", France 24, 7 March 2012 <https://www.france24.com/en/20120307-france-sarkozy-immigration-election-president-socialists-national-front> [accessed 22 July 2026].
[229] Joanne van Selm, "Migration in the Netherlands: Rhetoric and Perceived Reality Challenge Dutch Tolerance", Migration Policy Institute, 1 May 2019 <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/journal/country-profile/migration-netherlands-rhetoric-and-perceived-reality-challenge-dutch> [accessed 22 July 2026].
[230] Holly Ellyatt, "Sweden told people to open their hearts to immigrants 10 years ago. Its U-turn has been dramatic", CNBC, 7 October 2024 <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/10/07/swedens-immigration-stance-has-changed-radically-over-the-last-decade.html> [accessed 22 July 2026].
[231] Staniszewski et al., *Right road*, pp. 326-327.
[232] OECD, "International Migration Outlook 2025: Hungary", 3 November 2025 <https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/11/international-migration-outlook-2025_355ae9fd/full-report/hungary_0717facf.html> [accessed 15 June 2026].
[233] OECD, "International Migration Outlook 2025: Poland", 3 November 2025 <https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/11/international-migration-outlook-2025_355ae9fd/full-report/poland_9206f6b3.html> [accessed 15 June 2026].
[234] Vincenzo Genovese, "Poland and Hungary among those ready to challenge EU over 'unacceptable' migration rules", Euronews, 13 November 2025 <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/11/13/poland-hungary-among-those-ready-to-challenge-eu-over-unacceptable-migration-rules> [accessed 15 June 2026].
[235] Fergal Keane, "Migrant crisis: How Europe went from Merkel's 'We can do it' to pulling up the drawbridge", BBC, 3 September 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn5e5q7w41eo> [accessed 23 July 2026].
[236] "Europe public opinion tracker: top national issues", YouGov, 1 June 2026 <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54878-europe-public-opinion-tracker-top-national-issues> [accessed 23 June 2026].
[237] "Public concern about immigration rises to its highest level since 2016 Brexit vote", Ipsos, 7 June 2025 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/public-concern-about-immigration-rises-its-highest-level-2016-brexit-vote> [accessed 23 July 2026]; "Economist/Ipsos September 2015 Issues Index", Ipsos, 30 September 2015 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/economistipsos-september-2015-issues-index> [accessed 7 October 2026].
[238] "Public concern about immigration rises to its highest level since 2016 Brexit vote", Ipsos, 7 June 2025 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/public-concern-about-immigration-rises-its-highest-level-2016-brexit-vote> [accessed 23 July 2026].

upsurge in irregular arrivals and cohorts of migrants coming all together after Covid-19,[239] public angst surged again. By May 2025, about half (49%) of British voters saw immigration either as an issue of concern or the issue of greatest concern.[240] This was some 15 percentage points above the second most important issue, which was NHS/hospitals/healthcare.[241]

While, as discussed earlier in relation to Hungary's Fidesz or Germany's AfD, some of the rhetoric used by populists is either itself dangerous or, in other cases, the cover for more extreme views, centre-right parties cannot expect to defeat populists unless they manage to better control and reduce both legal and illegal immigration.

At the same time, with populations across the continent continuing to age,[242] an ongoing increase in unsustainable levels of net public sector debt across more developed European countries is inevitable without at least some level of skilled foreign workers to better balance the ratio of workers to retirees — that is, the number of workers relative to the number of people who have retired.

Principles

- **European countries need a much more restrictive and selective immigration system.** Net immigration equivalent to around 0.15% to 0.3% of the existing population per year is desirable in affluent European countries with an ability to effectively integrate new arrivals. The centre-right should not want the mass migration that the centre-left generally champion, nor should they want net-zero migration that right-wing populists generally champion.
- **European countries should play a role in processing asylum claims, but should now prioritise increasing routes for resettlement, rejections and deportations.** It is more desirable, both for those seeking asylum and for the host country, for refugees to arrive through resettlement routes than through dangerous and illegal journeys. It is clear that too many of those arriving illegally are not genuine asylum seekers and need to be deterred and deported more effectively. This is in contrast to the populist right, who generally do not believe in any asylum system for those arriving regularly; and they are in contrast to the centre-left, who generally believe that those who are granted refugee status and have arrived illegally should be treated the same as those who are granted refugee status and have arrived through a resettlement route.
- **Migrants should expect to contribute economically and socially to stay in European countries, including through integration.** If migrants are to stay long-

[239] Office for National Statistics, "Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending December 2025", 21 May 2026 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingdecember2025> [accessed 23 July 2026].
[240] "Public concern about immigration rises to its highest level since 2016 Brexit vote", Ipsos, 7 June 2025 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/public-concern-about-immigration-rises-its-highest-level-2016-brexit-vote> [accessed 23 July 2026].
[241] "Public concern about immigration rises to its highest level since 2016 Brexit vote", Ipsos, 7 June 2025 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/public-concern-about-immigration-rises-its-highest-level-2016-brexit-vote> [accessed 23 July 2026].
[242] Bartek Staniszewski and Ryan Shorthouse, "The case for more kids", *Critic*, 10 February 2025 <https://thecritic.co.uk/the-case-for-more-kids/> [accessed 15 June 2026].

term and become citizens of a European country, they need to integrate. It is only fair that they meet a minimum requirement for economic and social contribution to be granted long-term settlement in a European country. There is, in contrast to the right-wing populists, who generally do not believe migrants can contribute to and assimilate into a European country. And it is in contrast to the centre-left, who generally believe migrants do not need to integrate.

- **The centre-right believes in a civic, not ethnic, patriotism.** Pride in one's nation is good; it builds solidarity, supersedes divisions and gives people a cause higher than the self. The centre-right believes that people can enter a country and become proud citizens of it. This is in contrast to the centre-left, who generally do not believe patriotism to be desirable; and from the populist right, who generally believe you have to be born in a country to be proud of it.

Policies

- All low-skilled migrant routes should be closed. Instead, Youth Mobility Visa schemes should be signed between a select number of non-European countries, enabling a capped equivalent number of young people (aged 18-30) to migrate temporarily to each country.
- Restrict dependent visas so that, as a general rule, only individuals, rather than their whole families, can enter a European country.
- Introduce safe and legal routes for genuine asylum seekers to enter European countries, prioritising those from countries with similar values and cultures, or those who are at risk because they have worked for that European country abroad.
- Make refugee status temporary and subject to reviews at least every five years.
- Require asylum seekers who enter European countries irregularly to wait longer for permanent residency than those who arrive by regular means.
- Work with other European countries to ensure the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) allows the offshore asylum processing of irregular arrivals.
- Schools and housing associations in ethnically mixed areas should be incentivised to ensure more ethnic mixedness in the pupils and people they serve and discourage minorities from separating into distinct groups.
- Speaking fluently in the native language should be a prerequisite for receiving any benefits and achieving settlement.

Tactics

- European centre-right parties should refrain from placing immigration at the heart of any election campaign.
- European centre-right parties should avoid any framing of voters or supporters of populist parties as stupid, ill-informed or racist.
- European centre-right parties should stress that belonging and citizenship of a country can be earned through settlement, rather than being based on ethnicity.

- European centre-right parties should reject that their countries are structurally or institutionally racist, but argue that when racism does occur it is unacceptable and have hate laws that make it a criminal offence in relevant cases.

Priority two: Prosperity

For much of the post-war period, European centre-right parties were associated with the continent's impressive post-war growth and living standards,[243] but also played a major role in developing their respective social safety nets.[244] This was in part due to the belief in and implementation of economic liberalism, another key principle of the European centre-right, as identified in our previous report, *The right road.*[245]

Unfortunately, that growth, and the rise in living standards it sustained, have stalled in recent decades, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis. The fortunes of European centre-right parties have stalled with them.[246] This is placing a growing strain on existing welfare states and increasing the tax burden on already stretched younger workers. At the same time, many of those younger workers are finding it increasingly difficult to buy their own homes or start their own families. Life opportunities are being more determined by parental wealth than personal efforts.[247]

Populists, especially left-wing populists, are exploiting this stagnation to reinforce the ideas that there is an established elite that is hoarding opportunities and wealth at the expense of ordinary people. As explored in Chapter Two, those on lower incomes — and especially those who feel like they are worse off, even if they are not in fact — are more likely to vote for populists and more likely to switch from supporting a centre-right party to a populist one. At the same time, with populists generally moving to the left on economic policy in order to be successful and the non-populist left also occupying that space, this creates space for the centre-right to be the only movement offering economic liberalism.

If centre-right parties wish to restore their former electoral dominance, pro-growth policies in particular must take centre stage. While some regulation will always be essential, it must be proportionate and not excessively burden European businesses. Similarly, while the tax system should remain progressive, there is, in many cases, room for tax simplification. Finally, while European citizens, rightly, expect a fair social safety net, existing welfare systems have to be placed on a financially sustainable basis, a process that inevitably will involve difficult policy trade-offs.

[243] Staniszewski et al., *Right road*, pp. 313-316.
[244] Bryam Fanning, *Three roads to the welfare state: Liberalism, social democracy and Christian democracy* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2021); William Prescott, "British Conservatism, 1945-1951: Adapting to the age of collectivism" (MPhil thesis, University of Adelaide, 2015).
[245] Staniszewski et al., *Right road*, pp. 61-3.
[246] Ibid., p. 312.
[247] Alex Davenport, Peter Levell, and David Sturrock, "Why do wealthy parents have wealthy children?", Institute for Fiscal Studies, 8 September 2021 <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/output_url_files/R196-Why-do-wealthy-parents-have-wealthy-children.pdf> [accessed 23 July 2026].

Principles

- **Sound money, especially fiscal discipline, is the bedrock of successful economies.** Budget deficits and public debt urgently need reducing in European countries. Fiscal stimulus — either through unfunded or substantial government expenditure or tax cuts — when public debt is high is economically ruinous. Any centre-right government should aim to achieve and then maintain a public budget surplus within a parliament. This is in contrast to both the populist right, which is more interested in buying votes than balancing the books, as well as the centre- and populist left, which views any substantial cuts to state spending as immoral, however unaffordable it may be.
- **European countries should reject the precautionary principle in economic policymaking.** The precautionary principle, a risk management principle, according to which policies should not be implemented unless there is agreement that they will cause no harm,[248] in devising regulations at the national and European levels. While the intention behind it is noble, its application when it comes to economic policy is holding back Europe's competitiveness and, by extension, its economic prospects. This is in particular contrast to the centre-left, which prioritises harm minimisation and safety over risk-taking.
- **Be pro-market not free market**. Markets are the best way of allocating resources, but they can be inefficient and inequitable, so government and social institutions can help correct market problems, such as to avoid monopolies, preserve local culture and heritage and ensure competitiveness. This is in contrast to much of the populist right which, though it once possessed libertarian economic instincts, often resorts to forms of crony capitalism. It is also in contrast to the centre-left, which remains suspicious of market economics.
- **Welfare, including the state pension, needs to go to fewer people who get more, then more people who get less.** Centre-right parties have long favoured means-tested or insurance-based welfare rather than universal ones, both on cost grounds and to encourage individual responsibility. As populations age across Europe, and the strains on welfare systems increase, we must target government support more effectively, both to protect taxpayers from excessive financial burdens, and to ensure that governments can still support those who need it to get back on their feet. As with sound money, this is in contrast to the populist right, which for often cynical reasons wishes to buy the votes of pensioners, as well as the centre-left, which maintains an ideological commitment to universal benefits of all sorts.
- **Reduce taxation on income based on effort and enterprise, and increase taxation on income that derives more from luck and inheritance.** The weight of taxation across many European countries falls too heavily on work and working-aged people.[249] These groups — especially those on the lowest incomes — should be prioritised when it comes to reforming national tax policies. The centre-right is at its best when it, first and foremost, supports those striving to achieve the good life, rather

[248] European Union, "Precautionary principle", undated <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/precautionary-principle.html> [accessed 15 June 2026].
[249] Alex Mengden and Michael Christl, "Tax Burden on Labor in Europe, 2026", Tax Foundation Europe, 20 April 2026 https://taxfoundation.org/data/all/eu/tax-burden-on-labor-europe/ [accessed 26 July 2026].

than those who already have it. This is in contrast to the centre- and populist left, which mistakenly believes that government intervention, not hard work, is the route to prosperity, as well as the populist right, whose residual libertarian instincts remain hostile to any forms of taxes on wealth.

- **Policies should focus on widening opportunities for the acquisition of assets, not just the boosting of incomes.** If we are to address the economic frustrations that, in part, are contributing to the rise of both left- and right-wing populist parties across Europe, we need policies to help those with no or little wealth to acquire assets, empower them to leverage their assets effectively, and draw those assets down effectively, especially in retirement. Again, this is in contrast to the centre-left, which ideologically prefers the expansion of universal public services over the increase in wealth.

Policies

- Achieve a public budget surplus by the end of a parliament of a centre-right government.
- Achieve a set target for a meaningful reduction in net public debt by the end of a parliament of a centre-right government.
- Incentivise increased public and private capital investment in the country's start-ups and infrastructure.
- Abandon the use of the precautionary principle when devising economic policies at the national and European levels.
- Achieve a net reduction in the number of economic regulations by the end of a parliament of a centre-right government.
- Demand all public services demonstrate the successful use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to reduce their efficiency and effectiveness.
- Replace all universal benefits, including state pensions, with means-tested ones.
- Seek to increase the state pension age and the cultural norm for retirement to 70 as soon as is feasible.
- Incentivise and expand access to private pension schemes to support the increase in the age eligibility and means-testing of basic state pensions.
- Prioritise the reduction of payroll taxes above any other tax cuts.
- In countries with discretionary planning systems, introduce zoning to guarantee the building of new homes and infrastructure.

Tactics

- European centre-right parties should place the economy at the heart of any election campaign.
- European centre-right parties should make maximising economic growth its main mission in government.
- European centre-right parties should not promise any specific policy changes to certain taxes or spending in advance of an election, only principles they will follow in government.

Priority three: Participation

The centre-right believes firmly in the liberal democratic political system. In the economic sphere, this means being pro-market, encouraging competition and personal prosperity. In the social sphere, this means defending individual rights against overreaching state or corporate power. In the political sphere, it means promoting and respecting democracy.

However, in contrast to populists, democracy is not simply the 'will of the people', which can easily turn into the 'tyranny of the majority', as the philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville warned.[250] It is about respecting the outcome of democratic elections and referenda alongside ensuring there are institutions that provides checks and balances to political power, such as the judiciary.

Power, as Europe well knows, is dangerous. That is why concentrations of power — whether economically, culturally or politically — must be challenged. As the philosopher Karl Popper argued, states need institutions more than the right leadership to ensure they remain democratic, and that the economic interests of their citizens are safeguarded.[251] In contrast to the populist right then, the centre-right must promote powerful institutions over powerful individuals. But those institutions must be democratised and be accountable.

Indeed, across Europe, voters are becoming increasingly disillusioned with existing institutions, domestic and international. Populists are arguing that such institutions — whether it is the EU, the European Court of Human Rights or the European Central Bank — is superseding the expressed views of the public through the ballot box.

Populists have valid criticisms to some extent. Across Europe, technocratic bodies, at both the national and European levels, have been overcautious or excessively meddlesome. However, because some are not directly answerable to voters, their mistakes can prove difficult to correct.

If they wish to rebuild popular support for existing institutions and, by extension, themselves, centre-right parties need to enact reforms that make government speedier and more democratic. This does not mean, as both left- and right-wing populists would suggest, the abolition of existing institutions or withdrawal from international obligations — as Brexit showed in the UK, this carries many unexpected consequences. But it does mean reform.

Principles

- **Wherever practical, policy decisions should be made by elected governments.** The cession of executive and legislative authority to arms-length bodies, courts or international organisations is often carried out for noble reasons, namely to protect human rights or to improve the quality of decision-making.

[250] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago University Press, 2012).
[251] Karl Popper, *Open society and its enemies* (Routledge, 2002), Ch. 17.

Unfortunately, in several prominent instances, the resulting apparent inability of European governments to implement generally popular policies, such as the removal of failed asylum seekers,[252] risks seriously undermining public confidence in established institutions. A better balance needs to be struck,[253] one that answers the populist critique about the lack of accountability and slowness of decision-making, while avoiding the mistaken view on the centre-left that independent experts or judges are always the best assessors of complex trade-offs.

- **Wherever practical, abolish non-departmental public bodies.** This will reduce public expenditure and improve democratic accountability. There are broadly four types of non-departmental public bodies: transparency bodies; advisory bodies; delivery bodies; and enforcement bodies.[254] In many cases, the work of transparency and advisory bodies can be funded and delivered by corporate or charitable organisations instead. As with the previous principle, this addresses legitimate populist criticisms around democratic accountability, while rejecting their belief that a single leader or party can embody the legitimate people's will. Similarly, it again rejects the view on the centre-left that major policy decisions always have objectively correct answers, and instead acknowledges that such decisions involve complex trade-offs.
- **Wherever practical, decentralise power to the lowest possible tier of government.** Across several European countries, notably France[255] and the UK,[256] power has become excessively centralised, meaning that decisions are often taken by those in central government who are far removed geographically. In doing so, this can in some instances produce both negative policy outcomes and fuel local frustration. Wherever practical, this should be avoided. This stands in contrast to both the populist right and centre-left, both of which, for different reasons, favour concentrating power in the centre.
- **When implementing policies with a clear democratic mandate, opportunities for consultation and challenge should be limited.** Across multiple European countries, a growing number of high-profile judicial reviews are regularly frustrating government policy decisions. In October 2024, for example, the Italian government's signature policy for dealing with irregular migrants — an offshore asylum processing agreement with Albania — was thwarted in the courts.[257] Judicial reviews are not the only problem, with excessive consultation requirements slowing down government decision-making. In the UK, for example, a government AI tool "identified around 7,000 consultation duties in the statute book" in 2026, the result, according to the government press release, "of a culture that has prioritised process

[252] European Union Agency for Asylum, "Asylum report 2024: Box 6. Return of former applicants", 2024 https://www.euaa.europa.eu/asylum-report-2024/box-6-return-former-applicants? [accessed 26 July 2026].
[253] "Advocates' failure to grasp public concerns over asylum has given Home Office upper hand over reforms", Social Market Foundation, 5 May 2021 <https://www.smf.co.uk/advocates-failure-to-grasp-public-concerns-over-asylum-has-given-home-office-upper-hand-over-reforms/> [accessed 26 July 2026].
[254] Ryan Shorthouse, Andrew Harrop and Sam Robinson, "Framing the future: a new pensions commission", Bright Blue January 2020 <https://www.brightblue.org.uk/portfolio/framing-the-future-a-new-pensions-commission/>>> [accessed 8 October 2020].
[255] Simon Kuper, "Why France is stuck", *Financial Times*, 4 September 2025 <https://www.ft.com/content/301b0890-a539-4bb5-a99e-0fef63321a80?syn-25a6b1a6=1> [accessed 26 July 2026].
[256] Oscar Selby, "Fiscal devolution for London", Centre for Cities, 16 July 2026 <https://www.centreforcities.org/reader/fiscal-devolution-for-london/the-uk-is-very-fiscally-centralised-limiting-growth/> [accessed 26 July 2026].
[257] Lorenzo Tondo, Jon Henley and Ashifa Kassam, "Blow to Meloni's Albania deal as court orders asylum seekers' return to Italy", *Guardian*, 18 October 2024 <http://theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/18/blow-to-melonis-albania-deal-as-court-orders-asylum-seekers-return-to-italy> [accessed 9 October 2026].

over outcomes".[258] By creating a healthier balance between legal safeguards and policy flexibility, the centre-right can distinguish itself both from an overly procedural centre-left, as well as from a populist right that would move too far in the opposite direction.

- **Democratic power always supersedes corporate power.** While remaining committed to free enterprise and recognising its critical role in driving prosperity, it is a democratic necessity that large companies cannot be permitted to unduly influence government policymaking. At the same time, more could be done to give ordinary workers a stake in the businesses in which they work. By, among other measures, encouraging the development of employee-owned businesses,[259] the centre-right can stand out from a centre-left instinctively sceptical of private ownership. Further, by giving workers a greater stake in society, it can also provide a more attractive offer than the inefficient crony capitalism often associated with right-wing populist parties.[260]

Policies

- Wherever possible or practical, abolish non-departmental public bodies with a transparency or advisory function only. Those with enforcement and delivery roles have a role to play as arms of government.
- Reduce the number of times that government policy decisions can be judicially reviewed.
- Set time limits on all government consultations.
- Devolve as many policy competencies as possible, including on tax and spending, to the relevant tier of local government.
- Introduce the right for employees of larger employers to request a binding referendum on employee representation on boards.
- Introduce the right and provide finance for a minimum number of employees of a limited by shares company to give a counter-offer for the purchase of the company's controlling stake whenever a takeover bid is made.
- No parliamentarian should engage in consulting or corporate advisory work unless doing so is necessary to maintain a professional licence, such as law or accountancy.
- Increase the time limit between being a minister and working for a business in a sector that the minister regulated.

Tactics

- European centre-right parties should avoid personality politics by focussing their efforts on exposing populist policies rather than populist leaders.

[258] Cabinet Office, "'Box-ticking' consultations scrapped to speed up delivery", 10 September 2026 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/box-ticking-consultations-scrapped-to-speed-up-delivery> [accessed 9 October 2026].
[259] Bartek Staniszewski, "Mind your business? Expanding democratic business in the UK", Bright Blue, 18 January 2024 <https://www.brightblue.org.uk/bright-blue-democratisation-of-business-needed-to-help-uk-properly-become-a-property-owning-democracy/> [accessed 9 October 2026].
[260] Rachel Kleinfeld, "How Does Business Fare Under Populism?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 June 2023 <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/how-does-business-fare-under-populism> [accessed 9 October 2026].

- European centre-right parties should present themselves as a talented team rather than being led by a popular person alone.
- European centre-right parties should avoid coalitions wherever possible; instead, they should favour minority or 'confidence and supply' arrangements.
- European centre-right parties should not maintain a firewall with populist parties, except in Germany. Instead, they should collaborate with populist parties on an issue-by-issue basis to enable or prevent votes in parliament.
- European centre-right parties should seek to select more independent-minded candidates, disallowing those who disagree with specific centre-right principles rather than policies.

Conclusion

A summary of the recommended policies and tactics for centre-right parties across Europe is set out in Table 4.1, below.

Table 4.1. Summary of policy and tactical recommendations

Theme	Learning from populists	Differentiating from populists
People	Close all low-skilled migrant routes	
	Restrict dependent visas	
		Introduce safe and legal routes for genuine asylum seekers to enter European countries
	Make refugee status temporary and subject to reviews every five years	
	Force irregular arrivals to wait longer for permanent residency	
		Work with other European countries to seek ECHR reform
		Incentivise schools and housing associations to ensure more ethnic mixedness
	Link access to state benefits to fluency in local language	
		Refrain from placing immigration at the heart of any election campaign
	Avoid any framing of voters or supporters of populist parties as stupid, ill-informed or racist	

		Stress that belonging and citizenship of a country can be earned through settlement, rather than being based on ethnicity
	Reject that their countries are structurally or institutionally racist	
Prosperity		Achieve a public budget surplus by the end of a parliament of a centre-right government
		Achieve a set target for a meaningful reduction in net public debt.
		Incentivise increased public and private capital investment in the country's start-ups and infrastructure.
		Abandon the use of the precautionary principle
	Achieve a net reduction in the number of economic regulations	
		Demand all public services demonstrate the successful use of AI
		Replace all universal benefits and pensions with means-tested ones
		Increase the state pension age and the cultural norm for retirement to 70
		Incentivise and expand access to private pension schemes
		Prioritise the reduction of payroll taxes above any other tax cuts.
		In countries with discretionary planning systems, introduce zoning
		Place the economy at the heart of any election campaign
		Make maximising economic growth its main mission in government
		Don't promise specific policy changes to certain taxes or spending in advance of an election
Participation	Abolish non-departmental public bodies wherever possible or practical	
	Reduce the number of times that government policy	

	decisions can be judicially reviewed	
	Set time limits on all government consultations	
		Devolve as many policy competencies as possible to the relevant tier of local government
		Introduce the right for employees of larger employers to request a binding referendum on employee representation on boards
		Facilitate employee counter-offers when their firm receives a take-over bid
		No parliamentarian should engage in consulting or corporate advisory work unless doing so is necessary to maintain a professional licence
		Increase the time limit between being a minister and working for a business in a sector that the minister regulated
		Avoid focusing on the personal flaws of populist leaders
		Present themselves as a talented team rather than being led by a popular person alone
	Avoid coalitions wherever possible	
	Engage with populist parties on an issue-by-issue basis	
	Pre-select more independently- minded candidates	

This report has examined in detail the parties and voters of European right- and left-wing populism. Exploiting both cultural and, to a slightly lesser extent, economic grievances, populists have continued to grow in strength in recent decades, especially right-wing populist parties. Much of this growth has come at the expense of centre-right parties, which populists dismiss as members of an old, discredited elite.

The centre-right must better understand and compete with the policies and tactics of these ascendant populists in Europe. This report enables this. If the centre-right do not act, there can be little hope for their recovery. That does not mean adopting populist policies carte blanche, and certainly not trying to beat them at their own game, but it does mean acknowledging where populists have a point. Getting the balance right will not be easy or risk-

free. Do nothing, however, and even the historically successful centre-right parties face extinction.

Annex

The Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2024)

The Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) does not ask members of the public for their views. Instead, it regularly asks political scientists who study each country to rate that country's political parties on a range of issues. Most questions are scored on a scale from 0 to 10. The scores given by the different experts are averaged, so that each party ends up with a single score on each question. We used the 2024 survey, the most recent edition available.

We used the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey because no other resource provides the same breadth of data, which includes multiple European countries and political parties, and also because few other surveys ask questions which could be used to explore and test a more expansive definition of populism. Where such surveys do exist, such as the Swedish Authoritarian populism index,[261] they are normally built around voters — not political experts or politicians — and the views or actions of voters are often a poor representation of the views of the party they vote for and more often reflect, for example, the views of a particular socio-demographic niche that a political party attracts, the way a party is represented in the media, or historical positions.

The European Social Survey (Round 11)

For the European Social Survey, or ESS11, a sample is chosen reflecting the population as a whole. Participants are then asked a particularly comprehensive list of questions on their social and political attitudes and characteristics. Our analysis uses the answers of over 11,000 respondents to the eleventh round of the survey, across Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

Because some types of people are inevitably better represented in polling data than others, the ESS supplies weights for its data, which we apply throughout our analysis.

European populism index

Our European populism index gives each party in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey a score from 0 to 10 for how populist it is, where 0 means minimally populist and 10 means maximally populist. As explained in Chapter Two, we define populism as dividing society into a righteous 'people' and a corrupt 'elite', so the index measures how strongly a party emphasises and promotes that divide.

A party's score is the simple average of its scores on two CHES 2024 questions:

[261] Timbro, "Authoritarian populism index 2024", April 2024 <https://populismindex.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/TAPI_2024_digital_2024-04-15.pdf> [accessed 16 May 2026].

- **People versus elite** (code 'people_v_elite' in the survey data). Experts were asked whether a party believes that 'the people', rather than politicians, should make the most important decisions. A score of 10 means the party believes the people should make those decisions; a score of 0 means it believes elected office holders should make them.
- **Importance of anti-elite rhetoric** (code 'anti_elite_salience'). Experts were asked how important anti-establishment and anti-elite language was to the party in 2024. A score of 10 means it was extremely important; a score of 0 means it was not important at all.

To give a hypothetical example: a party scoring 9 on the first question and 8 on the second would have a populism index score of (9 + 8) ÷ 2 = 8.5. A party scoring 3 and 1 would have a score of (3 + 1) ÷ 2 = 2. Chart 2.1 shows the resulting scores for a selection of real parties: for example, the German AfD scores 8.5, while the British Labour Party scores 2.08.

Because the index is a sliding scale rather than a simple 'populist' or 'not populist' label, it is able to capture parties that are more or less populist rather than necessarily splitting them merely into a binary.

Pearson correlation (Table 2.1)

A correlation is a single number that describes a relationship between two variables. We used in Table 2.1 the most common measure of correlation, called Pearson correlation. It always lies between -1 and +1:

- A positive number means that as one variable goes up, the other tends to go up too. For example, taller people tend to be heavier, so height and weight are positively correlated.
- A negative number means that as one variable goes up, the other tends to go down. For example, the longer someone's daily commute, the less free time they tend to have.
- A number close to zero means there is no clear pattern either way.

Two cautions apply. First, Pearson correlation only measures linear relationships, where each an increase in one variable comes with a roughly steady change in the other. It can miss relationships that curve, which is why we use a different method for some of our other analysis, described below. Second, a correlation shows that two variables go together; it does not, on its own, show that one causes the other.

Multiple linear regression (Table 2.2)

A Pearson correlation looks at two variables in isolation. But people's characteristics and attitudes are often correlated with each other. For example, younger people are less likely to be married. If we found that unmarried people are more likely to support populist parties, this

is possibly not because of their marital status, but because unmarried people are, on average, younger.

A multiple linear regression can disentangle the two by working out the effect of a variable on something while holding all other variables constant. In the case of this report, that 'something' is how populist the party one supports is. We use multiple linear regression in Table 2.2 to control for each of the characteristics listed in Box 2.1: gender, age group, education level, ethnicity, marital status, urban or rural residence, news consumption, internet use, happiness, frequency of social meetings, including as compared to others, whether the respondent has been the victim of a crime within the last five years, whether the respondent feels safe walking alone after dark, religiosity, household income, interest in politics, trust in people, parliament, the legal system, the police, politicians, political parties, the European parliament and the united nations, the view that people can be trusted, the view that people try to be fair, the view that people try to be helpful, the view that the political system currently allows the respondent a say, the view that the political system currently allows the respondent influence, emotional attachment to one's country, emotional attachment to Europe, how one feels about one's household's income. In effect, the method asks: if we compared two people who were identical in every respect we list in Box 2.1 except for one variable, how would that variable correlate with how populist the party they support is?

There are several ways of conducting multiple linear regression. Weighted least squares is a method of conducting multiple linear regression on data which does not have constant variance by assigning smaller weights to data with high variance. This is the case for ESS data, which is why we used it.

Furthermore, ESS data comes in a very high range for different variables. For example, time spent using the internet is measured in minutes and can run into the hundreds; emotional attachment to one's country is rated on a scale from 0 to 10; and being male is simply a yes (1) or a no (0). To solve this, we standardised every variable by converting it into a z-score. A z-score expresses a value as how far it sits above or below the average, measured in terms of standard deviations. A standard deviation is simply a measure of how spread out, on average, people's answers are. Once every measure is expressed in this way, minutes of internet use and a 0 to 10 attachment score are on the same footing and can be compared directly. This is what allows for figures in Table 2.2 to be compared with one another.

Each figure in Table 2.2 tells us how much the populism index score of the party a person supports tends to change, measured in standard deviations, when that one characteristic or attitude in the first column increases by one standard deviation and everything else is held constant. For example:

- A figure of -0.05 means that a one-standard-deviation increase in that characteristic is linked to a 0.05-standard-deviation decrease in the populism index score of the party a person supports;

- A figure of +0.15 would mean that a one-standard-deviation increase in that characteristic is linked to a 0.15-standard-deviation increase in the populism index score of the party a person supports.

Moreover, in Table 2.2, we only report results with a p-value below 0.005. This means that, for each result shown, there is less than a 0.5% chance of the relationship being that strong by accident, for example as the result of a small sample size.

Again, the relationships measured here are linear, so they does not account for any irregular changes in correlation.

Table 2.3

All of the information about voters used in Table 2.3 comes from the eleventh round of the ESS. All of the information about political parties comes from our populism index.

We classified parties as centre-right using the method set out in Bright Blue's earlier report, *The right road: The future of the European centre-right*. Under this method, a party counts as centre-right if it is centrist and also has at least two of the following three features: it is conservative, it is non-cosmopolitan or it is economically liberal.

To identify populist parties, we picked the top one or two parties from each country in our populism index, depending on how many parties were near the top of the spectrum in the given country. For example, in France, both FI and RN are near the top of the spectrum, so they both count as populist, but Sweden lacked a major party near the top of the populist spectrum other than SD (*Sverigedemokraterna*) between 2021 and 2024, so only SD counts as a populist party for Sweden in the analysis. All the parties chosen as populist, as one might expect, scored higher in the populism index than the country's centre-right parties. Ultimately, there is a subjective element involved in deciding what counts as 'near the top of the spectrum,' and so exactly where the cut-off is, but this is inevitable, and the omission or inclusion of a few borderline parties would not have significantly changed the results given the vast number of parties analysed altogether.

To identify switchers, we used the ESS, which asks respondents both which party they voted for at the most recent national election and which party they feel closest to now. We defined a switcher as someone who said they voted for an established centre-right party at the most recent election, but who now says that the party they feel closest to is a populist party. We found 161 such respondents.

For each characteristic and attitude in Box 2.1, we then calculated the average answer given by switchers and the average answer given by centre-right voters, applying the survey's weights. Because the ESS uses different scales for different questions, as explained earlier, we then standardised these averages using z-scores, so that they can be compared with one another, just as we had for Table 2.2.

In Table 2.3, '0' represents the average across all respondents. A positive figure means the group scores higher than the average respondent on that characteristic or attitude; a negative figure means it scores lower. The further a figure is from zero, the bigger the difference from the average person.

161 is a small number of people from which to draw conclusions, particularly when they are spread across sixteen countries. Results based on small groups are more easily affected by chance, so only the largest differences in Table 2.3 should be treated as reliable; smaller differences should be treated with caution. A recommendation for future research is to repeat this study with a larger sample, which would require original data.

Polynomial regression

Several charts (Charts 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3) in this report use polynomial regression. It demonstrates the relationship between any two variables and accounts for irregular changes in correlation, as is visible on the Charts. The 95% confidence interval is shown with a grey shading.

Chart 2.2

Each dot is one political party from the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey. The survey question's code is lrecon. "Parties can be classified in terms of their STANCE ON ECONOMIC ISSUES such as privatization, taxes, regulation, government spending, and the welfare state. Parties on the economic left want government to play an active role in the economy. Those on the economic right want a reduced role for government. 0 = extreme left 10 = extreme right".

A dot's position from left to right shows where the experts placed that party on economic policy, from 0 (the extreme left, wanting the government to play a very active role in the economy) to 10 (the extreme right, wanting a reduced role for government). A dot's height shows the party's score on our European populism index, from 0 (minimally populist) to 10 (maximally populist). Each party counts equally, regardless of its size or share of the vote. The blue line is the line of best fit, produced using polynomial regression, as explained above.

Chart 2.3

Each dot is one political party from the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey. The survey question's code is galtan. "Parties can be classified in terms of their views on democratic freedoms and rights. "LIBERTARIAN" OR "POSTMATERIALIST" parties favor expanded personal freedoms, for example, abortion rights, same-sex marriage, and democratic participation. "TRADITIONAL" OR "AUTHORITARIAN" parties reject these ideas in favor of order, tradition, and stability, believing that the government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues".

A dot's position from left to right shows where the experts placed that party on social policy, from 0 (the extreme left) to 10 (the extreme right). A dot's height shows the party's score on

our European populism index, from 0 (minimally populist) to 10 (maximally populist). Each party counts equally, regardless of its size or share of the vote. The blue line is the line of best fit, produced using polynomial regression, as explained above.

Chart 2.4

This chart is based on ESS data. Respondents to the ESS asked how emotionally attached they feel to Europe, on a scale from 0 (not at all attached) to 10 (very attached). We grouped respondents according to their answer, so there is one dot for each point on the scale, from 0 to 10.

The height of each dot shows the average populism index score of the parties supported by the people at each level of attachment to Europe. The size of each dot shows how many people are in that group: the bigger the dot, the more people gave that answer. Again, the blue line is produced using polynomial regression.

Chart 3.1

Each dot is one political party from the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey. The survey question's code is judicial_independence: "Position on JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE 0 = the judiciary should be independent 10 = the government should have influence over the judiciary".

A dot's position from left to right shows where the experts placed that party on judicial independence policy, from 0 (complete judicial independence) to 10 (a lot of government influence over the judiciary). A dot's height shows the party's score on our European populism index, from 0 (minimally populist) to 10 (maximally populist). Each party counts equally, regardless of its size or share of the vote. The blue line is the line of best fit, produced using polynomial regression, as explained above.

Chart 3.2

Each dot is one political party from the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey. The survey question's code is anti_islam. "How salient has ANTI-ISLAM RHETORIC been for the party leadership in 2024? 0 = not important at all 10 = extremely important".

A dot's position from left to right shows where the experts placed that party on Islam, from 0 (anti-Islamic rhetoric completely unimportant to the party) to 10 (anti-Islamic rhetoric extremely important to the party). A dot's height shows the party's score on our European populism index, from 0 (minimally populist) to 10 (maximally populist). Each party counts equally, regardless of its size or share of the vote. The blue line is the line of best fit, produced using polynomial regression, as explained above.

Chart 3.3

Each dot is one political party from the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey. Two survey questions are used:

- **Position on immigration** (code "immigrate_policy"): where the party stands on immigration policy, which we rescaled to run from -5 (favouring maximally open immigration) to +5 (favouring the most restrictive immigration system).
- **Salience of immigration** (code "immigrate_salience"): how important immigration policy is to the party, from 0 (not at all important) to 10 (extremely important).

We multiplied the two together to show a party's position on immigration. This means the index runs from -50 to +50 and captures both which way a party leans on immigration and how much it emphasises the issue. For example, a party that is as restrictive as possible (+5) and treats immigration as its most important issue (10) scores +5 × 10 = +50, and a party that is moderately pro-open borders (-3) and gives immigration fairly high importance (6) scores -3 × 6 = -18.

A dot's position from left to right shows where the party stands on immigration, from 0 (extremely pro-immigration) to 10 (extremely anti-immigration). A dot's height shows the party's score on our European populism index, from 0 (minimally populist) to 10 (maximally populist). Each party counts equally, regardless of its size or share of the vote. The blue line is the line of best fit, produced using polynomial regression, as explained above.