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Why the working class turned Right

Dennis Spies
Research Training Group SOCLIFE
University of Cologne

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Dennis Spies

Abstract

While the overrepresentation of working-class members among the electorates of extreme right parties (ERPs) in Western Europe is well documented, previous studies have usually explained this pattern as a result of this voter group's changing political preferences. In contrast to these studies, this article argues that it is not the changing political preferences of the working class that lead them to vote for ERPs, but changes in the supply side of party competition that have caused the re-orientation of these voters toward the extreme right.

Differentiating between an economic and a cultural dimension of party competition, it is shown that both the policy options offered by parties to voters as the salience of the two issue-dimensions have changed dramatically over the last three decades. While the salience of economic issues as well as of party system polarization among these issues have declined in most Western European countries, the very opposite trend can be identified for non-economic issues, including the core issues of ERPs (e.g., immigration and law and order).

These changes on the supply side of party competition cause working-class voters to base their vote decisions solely on their authoritarian, non-economic preferences and not — as in the past — on their left-wing economic demands. The theoretical assumptions are tested empirically with data from the *Eurobarometer Trend File* for the period from 1980 to 2002. In contexts where the economic dimension is more polarized than the cultural dimension, the positive impact of being a member of the working class on the vote decision for an ERP is significantly reduced.

Introduction

Two decades of scientific research regarding extreme right parties (ERPs) and their voters have identified a set of individual characteristics and attitudes that affect the voting decisions in favor of an ERP. While already the first comparative studies in the field (Betz 1994; Hainsworth 1992; Kitschelt 1995) have highlighted the role of a person's social class status for explaining the vote decision for an ERP, the disproportionately high support for ERPs among working-class members is as well-documented as its reasons are discussed (Arzheimer 2008; de Lange 2007; Houtman 2003; Ivarsflaten 2005). In short, this support raises a paradoxical question. Why do voters who have always been associated with left-wing political parties turn to the extreme right?

Different answers to this question are discussed in the literature. First, some authors argue that increasing international competition has led to changing political preferences among this voter group, which in turn has resulted in a realignment of social groups formerly opposed along economic issues. Following this argument, the high level of support for ERPs among the working class is the result of a new demand for more market-liberal policies among at least parts of this voter group. Second, some scholars point to the decreasing importance of social status for the individual vote decision *per se*, and they contend that it is more appropriate to examine the policy preferences or attitudes of these voters in order to explain their vote decisions. According to this perspective, the high levels of support for ERPs among the working class can be attributed to the high levels of anti-immigrant sentiment and political dissatisfaction among this group.

This paper examines the variation in working-class support for ERPs in Western Europe for the period from 1980 to 2002. In the first section, three theses that address reasons for this support are discussed, as they have been identified by Ivarsflaten (2005): the realignment-, the policy-, and the economic division theses. As will be shown, none of these theses fully explain the varying support of working-class voters for ERPs satisfactorily. Either the theoretical arguments are not supported by empirical evidence (realignment thesis), or the given explanation simply shifts the *explanandum* (policy and economic division theses). After investigating possible changes in the political attitudes of working-class members during the last few decades, a party-centered explanation for the varying working-class support of ERPs is presented. It is argued that the political offers made to voters by parties have changed dramatically during the last thirty years, especially with regard to economic issues. In countries where the economic dimension of party competition has decreased in both salience and polarization, the support for ERPs among the working class is considerably higher than in countries that do not show such a trend. Accordingly, in elections with both a high salience of cultural issues and a high polarization of parties along these issues, working-class voters have strong incentives to cast their vote decisions on the basis of their authoritarian, non-economic preferences, which cause them to vote for parties of the extreme right. These theoretical assumptions are tested in the final section using a multi-level model that covers thirteen Western European countries. The

findings point to a theoretical link between the rising ERP support in Western Europe and the decline of class-based voting. It is argued that both phenomena can be explained by changing patterns of party competition, thereby supporting recent studies in the latter debate.

Working-class support for ERPs

According to the first comparative studies in the field (Betz 1994; Hainsworth 1992; Kitschelt 1995), a person's social class has been identified as one of the key variables that explain the vote decision for an ERP. In particular, two social groups show a disproportionately high level of support for these parties: the working class and the petty bourgeoisie (artisans, small shop-owners and independents). Empirical evidence for the over-representation of these groups among the ERPs' electorates is offered by a multiplicity of studies (Arzheimer 2008; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Betz and Johnson 2004; Ignazi 2003a; Ivarsflaten 2005; Kitschelt 1995; Kitschelt and McGann 2005; Lubbers et al. 2002; Rydgren 2004). What makes this correlation between class status and support for an ERP most interesting is the fact that ERPs receive support from both groups. While the over-representation of the petty bourgeoisie is unsurprising, as this group has always shown more support for right-wing parties, the significant level of working-class support for ERPs is rather paradoxical. Why do voters who have an economic interest in left economic policies and have thus mainly supported left-wing parties for decades now cast their votes for ERPs? What has caused this 'proletarianisation of the Extreme Right' (Betz and Johnson 2004) and turned ERPs into 'workers' parties' (Ignazi 2003a)?

The study by Ivarsflaten (2005) addresses precisely these questions. Reviewing previous theoretical arguments and on the basis of her empirical findings, Ivarsflaten distinguishes three explanations for the over-representation of working-class and petty bourgeoisie voters among the ERP electorates: the realignment thesis, the policy thesis and the economic division thesis. First, some authors identify a realignment of working-class and petty bourgeoisie voters along economic issues (Kitschelt 1995; Kitschelt and McGann 2005; de Lange 2007). Kitschelt (1994, 1995) argues that increased international competition in some economic sectors has led to more market-liberal views among blue-collar employees working in these industries. As a result of these changing economic preferences and the authoritarian attitudes of the working class, this voter group has shifted its electoral support to ERPs. Second, some scholars argue that social class has become increasingly irrelevant to the vote decision and that research should instead consider the distinct policy preferences of ERP voters (Van der Brug et al. 2005; Van der Brug and Fennema 2003; Van der Brug and Fennema 2007). In this paper, I will refer to this argument as the "policy thesis." Authors advocating this thesis come to the conclusion that the disproportionately high level support for ERPs among the working class, as well as the petty bourgeoisie, is mainly caused by the fact that both groups share distinct authoritarian, non-economic policy preferences. Third, Ivarsflaten (2005) has offered an explanation that she calls the economic division thesis. Similar to the policy thesis, she argues that

working-class and petty bourgeoisie ERP voters are still divided on economic issues, but share common non-economic preferences that are addressed mainly by the extreme right, namely: anti-immigrant sentiment, strong preferences for law and order policies, negative attitudes toward the European Union, and political disillusionment.

Before we discuss the empirical evidence in support of the three theses, it should be noted that they are not as different as they may appear, but they share some common theoretical premises. First, these theses hold that increasing support for ERPs is caused by developments on the side of the voters, or the demand side of the electoral competition. It is argued that voters either have become more similar in terms of their economic preferences (realignment thesis), now base their vote decisions on policy preferences instead of their social class (policy thesis), or base their vote decisions upon non-economic instead of economic preferences (policy and economic division thesis). Second, it should be noted that all of the three theses assume that the vote decision for an ERP is guided by the voter's policy preferences. While this seems obvious for the policy and economic division theses, this is also the case for the realignment thesis offered by Kitschelt (1995). When van der Brug and Fennema state that "modern voters do not cast their votes in agreement with which social group they belong to, but in agreement with their own ideological and policy preferences" (2003: 66) this is exactly in the sense of authors favoring the realignment thesis. Their argument is not that working-class voters support a party *because* they are working-class voters, but that being a member of the working class leads to distinct economic policy preferences, which again influence the vote decision for a distinct party—in this case, an ERP. What separates the approaches (and also the measurements) of authors advocating the policy or economic division theses from those favoring the realignment thesis is the intervening role of a person's social class in the vote decision. While advocates of the policy and economic division theses directly measure respondents' policy preferences, the realignment thesis implies that a person's social class can be seen as a proxy for his policy preferences.

Coming to the empirical evidence for the three theses and starting with the realignment thesis, most studies conclude that a realignment of former opposed social groups along economic issues is not supported by the data. Arzheimer (2008) finds no correlation between a person's market-liberal views and support for an ERP; Ivarsflaten (2005) points to the continued distinct economic preferences of working-class and petty bourgeoisie ERP voters; and Mudde (2007) questions the relevance of economic issues for both ERP voters and these parties themselves. While advocates of the realignment thesis have recently argued that ERPs have limited their former distinct market-liberal appeal in favor of a more centrist economic position (de Lange 2007), their conclusion that this shift allows these parties to attract support from both groups seems unconvincing. Why should economic left- (or right-) leaning voters support an economically centrist party instead of a party of the economic left (or right)? In contrast, empirical evidence for the policy and economic division theses can be found in nearly all studies that use attitudinal variables to predict the vote decision for an ERP (Arzheimer 2008; Ivarsflaten 2005; Lubbers et al. 2002; Kessler and Freeman 2005; Rydgren 2008; van der Brug et al.

2005). ERP voters share distinct authoritarian, non-economic attitudes, although they are still divided on their economic preferences.

Therefore, the policy and economic division theses come to a very similar conclusion, which is that the paradox of working-class support for the extreme right can be explained by the right-wing cultural views of these voters, which they share with members of the petty bourgeoisie (Ivarsflaten 2005). Seemingly, working-class voters no longer cast their votes on the basis of their (left) economic preferences, but on the basis of their (right) non-economic preferences. So is the paradox solved, and does this conclusion really give a satisfactory answer to the question of why working-class voters support ERPs? I would oppose this view and argue that the answer given by advocates of the policy and economic division theses only changes the *explanandum*. The question is no longer why the working class votes for ERPs (because they share their non-economic ideology), but now, *why do people with economic left and non-economic right policy preferences decide to let their vote decisions be guided exclusively by the latter?*

With regard to this new question, it should be noted that blue-collar workers have always favored *both* left economic and right non-economic stances. “The poorer strata everywhere are more liberal or leftist on economic issues (...). But when liberalism is defined in non-economic terms — as support for civil liberties, internationalism, etc. — the correlation is reversed. The more well-to-do are more liberal, the poorer are more intolerant” (Lipset 1981: 92). Reviewing this initial observation, which is also supported by more recent articles (Houtman 2003; Middendorp and Meloen 1990), the point made by van der Brug and van Spanje (2009), that voters who combine economic left and non-economic right attitudes are not represented by any political parties in Western Europe, is as correct as it is not new. The working class has ever since combined these distinct preferences, but as decades of studies on class voting have reported (Clark and Lipset 2001; Evans 1999; Evans and Payne 1999; Lipset 1981; Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Sartori 1969), they have tended to ignore their right non-economic preferences in favor of their left economic demands. However, since the rise of ERPs during the 1980s, this pattern appears to have changed, at least in those countries with strong working-class support for ERPs. Today, at least parts of the working class have decided to cast their votes solely on the basis of their non-economic demands, neglecting their left-leaning material preferences.

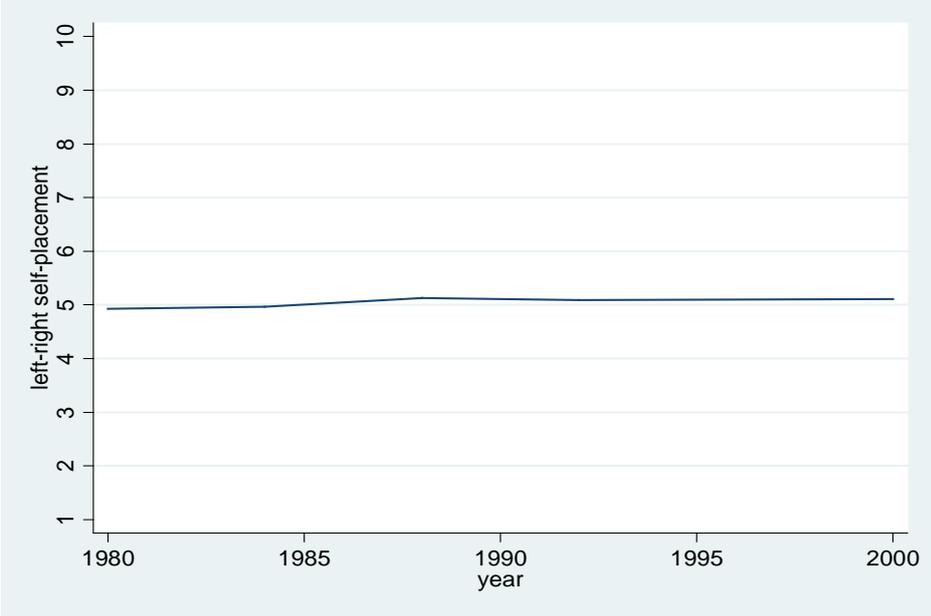
As will be argued in the third section, the explanation for this shift lies in the changing patterns of party competition among Western European countries. Before this supply-side argument is developed in depth, the discussion first focuses upon possible changes in the political preferences of the working class.

The political preferences of the working class

The three theses regarding working-class support for ERPs, as discussed above, have in common the argument that some factor has changed with regard to the political preferences of this voter group. It is

stated that working-class voters have become more market-liberal (realignment thesis), or that they now now guide their votes based on non-economic, rather than economic preferences (policy and economic division theses). It might also be argued that working-class voters have become more authoritarian over the last decades; therefore, they have turned their support to ERPs. The *Eurobarometer Trend File* (Schmitt et al. 2005) offers two well-known variables that might account for the political preferences of working-class members: the respondent’s left-right self-placement and the materialist-postmaterialist index developed by Ronald Inglehart (1977, 1990). When we asked working-class members to locate themselves on a left-right scale from 1 (leftmost) to 10 (rightmost), we obtained the following trend (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Left-right self-placement of working-class members in Western Europe



Two findings should be noted. First, the self-reported position of working-class members has remained relatively stable in the seven countries analyzed.¹ Second, while there are some cross-country differences (not shown), these never exceed more than 0.5 points on the ten-point scale over the whole period analyzed.

One might argue that the left-right placement of voters is far from a perfect indicator for this study’s purposes, as it remains unclear what voters have in mind when they refer to labels such as “left” and “right.” Some voters might regard the left-right scale as a super dimension, integrating all possible political issues, some might understand it as a purely economic scale, and yet others might think of it in terms of non-economic issues, e.g., relating to environmental protection. There are good reasons to believe that the issue is becoming even more complicated, when comparing different

¹ As not all thirteen countries analysed in the final section have participated in all years since 1980, Figures 1 and 2 report mean values for only seven countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany (West), Greece, Italy and the Netherlands.

countries at different time points; the meanings of “left” and “right” may be country and time-specific (Enyedi and Deegan-Krause 2010; Franzmann and Kaiser 2006; Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2006; Marks et al. 2006). Regardless, and while the significance of “left” and “right” to different voters remains unclear, a rightward trend is expected for this indicator of political preferences, if the argument about the working class’s changing political preferences is valid. If left-right is understood as an economic scale and working-class members have become more market-liberal—as the realignment thesis states—a right-leaning trend would be expected. Likewise, if left-right is understood as a non-economic scale and working-class members have become more authoritarian, the same would be expected as well. This is the same case if left-right is understood as a dimension including all political issues, whether they are economic or non-economic. However, this rightward trend does not occur.

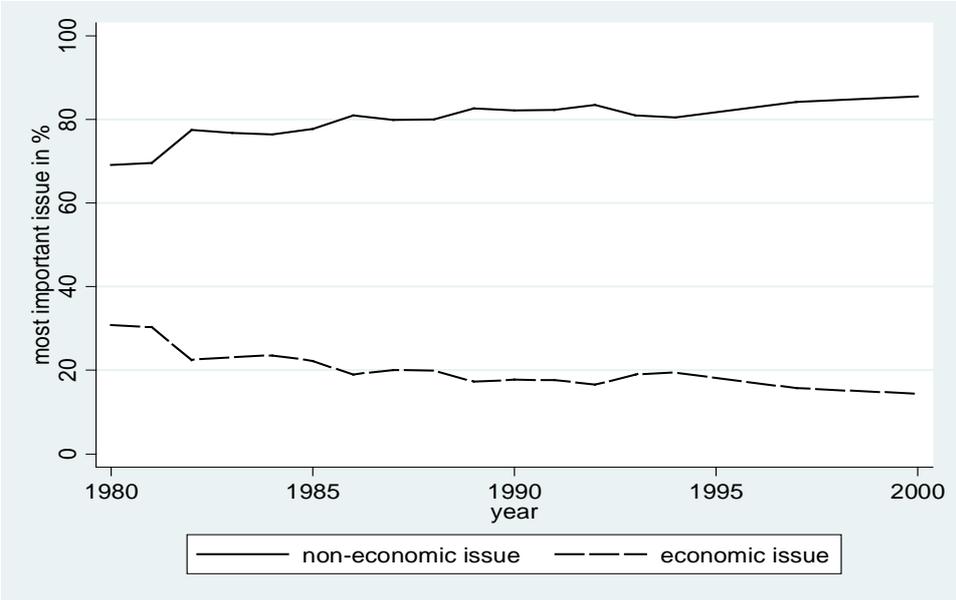
Another way to examine the political preferences of voters is through the Inglehart Index, which asks respondents to name their first and second most important goals out of four political issues: (1) maintenance of law and order, (2) giving people more say in government decisions, (3) fighting rising prices, and (4) protecting freedom of expression. The answers are then combined to construct a materialist-postmaterialist index, where (1) and (3) are seen as indicators for a materialist value orientation, and (2) and (4), for a postmaterialist value orientation.

With regard to the Inglehart Index, three things should be noted. First, the index is only weakly correlated with the left-right self-placement (Spearman’s rho: 0.161). This shows that the two indicators measure different underlying concepts. While both concepts are related to the political preferences of respondents, the left-right self-placement measures a person’s *political attitudes*, while the Inglehart Index accounts for the *ranking of political issues*. Second, as Flanagan (Inglehart and Flanagan 1987) notes, three of the four Inglehart items (1, 2 and 4) are related to non-economic issues, while only one item (3) can be seen as an indicator for economic issues. This results in an overrepresentation of non-economic answers. Third, the index does not include an item that respondents with a strong interest in left-wing economic policies can be expected to choose, as “fighting rising prices” is usually regarded as an answer that accounts for right-wing economic preferences. This last point is especially problematic for working-class members, as these individuals can be expected to have a strong interest in left-wing economic policies, for which the index does not account.

To compensate for these shortcomings, Figure 2 presents the trend for the most important issues reported among working-class members in Western Europe. For this trend, items 1, 2 and 4 were summarized to measure non-economic value priorities (whether left or right), while item 3 accounts for (right) economic preferences. In contrast to the left-right self-placement, a common trend is obvious: the percentage of working-class members who rank economic issues as being most important has decreased significantly over the period analyzed. While about 35 percent of these voter

groups assigned these issues the highest priority in 1980, only 17 percent did so at the end of the century.

Figure 2: Most important issues to working-class members in Western Europe



In conclusion, the political preferences of working-class members have remained relatively stable in terms of left and right. Given the potential problems of this scale, it can be concluded that the working-class is as liberal/authoritarian and as economic left/right as it has ever been since 1980. However, the ranking of political issues has changed significantly over the period analyzed. Many working-class members do not rank economic issues as highly as they have in the past, and today they tend to give cultural issues the highest priority.

What do these findings mean for the question regarding working-class support for ERPs? If we agree that the working class in Western Europe has remained consistently authoritarian and does still harbor a strong interest in left-oriented economic policies, but that the priorities of this voter group have changed from economic to non-economic issues, this change in priorities might have influenced the voting behavior of working-class members. If these voters still rank economic issues as being the most important, they should still have a strong incentive to vote for parties of the economic left, and not for ERPs, given their more market-liberal appeal. In contrast, if working-class members give non-economic issues the highest priority, they should support a party that matches their authoritarian preferences, which could be an extreme right party, and not a more liberal party of the economic left.

However, why have the political priorities of working-class members changed during the last couple of decades? As will be argued in the next section, the explanation for this shift toward cultural issues lies in the changing patterns of party competition among Western European party systems, or the supply side of the electoral competition.

Working-class support for ERPs: A party competition approach

The idea that patterns of party competition influence the voting decision for an extreme right party and can thus explain parts of the variation in support for these parties among Western European countries has already been discussed by a number of previous studies. While most of these studies model party competition as one-dimensional, there is no consensus about the issue content of this single dimension. Some authors claim that only a set of non-economic ERP core issues are relevant because ERPs only compete among these issues with other parties (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Ignazi 2003b; Lubbers et al. 2002; Meguid 2005). Other scholars argue that party competition in Western Europe can still be described in terms of “left” and “right,” as this super dimension has mainly absorbed the relatively new issues raised by the extreme right (Abedi 2002; Carter 2005; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). Only a few studies addressing the way party competition affects the electoral fortunes of the extreme right distinguish between the economic and cultural dimensions of party competition. Interestingly, many of these authors are also advocates of the realignment thesis discussed above (Kitschelt 1995; Kitschelt 2007; de Lange 2007; Kitschelt and McGann 2005). While these scholars state that ERPs directly compete with other parties among economic issues—an assumption that is highly questionable, as indicated in the first section—the belief that an economic dimension of party competition may nonetheless be of importance for the electoral fortunes of ERPs has recently been put forward again by more recent studies (Bornschiefer 2008; Kriesi et al. 2006; Rydgren 2004, 2005).

This paper’s argument adheres to these latter studies and claims that it is necessary to distinguish between two dimensions of party competition in order to understand which changes have taken place in Western European party systems since the 1980s, and how these changes have contributed to the prominence of working-class voters among the ERPs’ electorates. More specifically, it is argued that the salience of the economic, class-based dimension of party competition is in decline in some Western European countries, but not—or to a lesser extent—in others. At the same time, parties’ policy positions on the economic dimension converge, which means that voters do not see great differences between the parties anymore. Parallel to the decline of the economy-related dimension of party competition, the salience of the cultural dimension of party competition, consisting mainly of the ERPs’ core issues and their liberal counter-issues, has increased. Parties’ policy positions on this new dimension have simultaneously diverged as well, offering voters more distinct policy options than before. These developments on the supply side of party competition impact the considerations under which working-class members decide for which party to vote.

The idea that the high salience of non-material issues favors ERPs has already been put forth (Ignazi 2003b) and empirically tested in previous studies (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Meguid 2005). The positive correlation between the salience of these issues (immigration, law and order, and anti-

multiculturalism) and the electoral success of ERPs is explained by the fact that ERPs ‘own’ these issues and thus benefit if other parties also pay attention to them (Ignazi 2003b). In line with this argument, it can also be assumed that the high salience of economic issues has a negative impact on the electoral results of ERPs. This negative relationship is based on the findings of previous studies that economic issues are of no or only of minor importance for voters in favor of the extreme right (Arzheimer 2008; Ivarsflaten 2005), as well as for those parties themselves (Mudde 2007). The high salience of economic issues therefore encourages working-class voters to vote on the basis of their economic preferences, which are not in line with the economic appeal of ERPs.

In addition to this salience-based argument, I contend that it is also necessary to account for the policy alternatives offered to voters, measured by the polarization of the party system. To clarify this point further, one might consider the following example. In a two-party system, both parties dedicate 80 percent of their appeals to economic issues, while non-economic themes are seen to be of only little relevance and are given only 20 percent by both parties. In this case, working-class voters should have a strong incentive to base their voting decisions on their left-wing economic preferences. Let us now assume that both parties offer very similar programs with regard to economic issues, which will result in a low degree of polarization on this dimension. Both parties favor a state-interventionist approach, and both wish to expand social services and to protect state-owned industry sectors from international competition; in short: both parties are economically left-wing. In contrast, the two parties are highly polarized on the non-economic dimension: one party favors a restrictive policy toward immigrants and advocates a tough law-and-order state, while the other party advocates a multi-cultural integration approach and strongly defends citizens’ rights to freedom. In this case, rational working-class voters should base their decisions on their non-material interests, even if this dimension is less salient. While voting on the basis of economic issues would not make a significant difference upon the outcome and could therefore be regarded as ‘wasted’, voting on the basis of non-economic preferences offers much more distinct alternatives in outcome. The arguments made thus far can be summarized into two hypotheses:

- H1: In countries where economic issues are more salient than non-economic issues, working-class voters will make voting decisions based on their left-wing economic preferences. This leads them to vote for parties of the economic left and not for ERPs (and vice versa).
- H2: In countries where parties are more polarized among economic than among non-economic issues, working-class voters will make voting decisions based on their left-wing economic preferences. This leads these them to vote for parties of the economic left and not for ERPs (and vice versa).

While the incentives given by the salience and the polarization of the two dimensions are theoretically the same for all voters, the discussed variables of party competition are especially important to voters of the working class. This is because these voters combine the demand for left economic and right non-economic policies (Houtman 2003; Kriesi 1999; Lipset 1981; Middendorp

and Meloen 1990). Contrary to voters with a more centrist position on one of the two dimensions, working-class voters *must* decide between these two opposite demands, as there is almost no party in Western Europe that offers a combination of both policies (Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). If working-class voters realize that the economic dimension is in decline in terms of salience and do not see any differences between the parties on this dimension, they would have the greatest incentives to base their vote decisions on their authoritarian non-material preferences, which directly leads them to vote for ERPs.

Following this argument, the rise of the extreme right in Western Europe was not caused by changes on the demand side, but was initiated by the mainstream political parties themselves. Parts of the electorate and especially the working class have had authoritarian, anti-immigrant and anti-liberal attitudes, but these attitudes had never previously guided their vote decision, as this was prevented by the prominence of economic political issues.

Changing patterns of party competition in Western Europe

This section gives an overview of the developments on the supply side of party competition in Western Europe during the period between 1980 and 2005.² In order to provide a broad descriptive overview of the changing patterns of party competition, time trends for the salience of economic and non-economic issues and party system polarization among these issues have been estimated for thirteen Western European countries.³

Let us first consider the salience of economic and non-economic issues. For each issue dimension, a salience measure based on the CMP dataset (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006) has been constructed. For the economic dimension, all CMP categories that relate to economic issues⁴ were taken into account; for the non-economic dimension, only non-economic categories were used.⁵ The frequencies for both issue sets were taken from the CMP dataset and then multiplied for each party with this party's share of votes. Finally, these values were summed up for each single election. This procedure makes the units of the two measures of salience difficult to interpret, but they are comparable both over time and between countries.

It should be repeated that the salience of each dimension says nothing about the policy options offered to voters on this dimension. In order to account for these options, a polarization index has been

² This period was chosen because most parties regarded as ERPs have emerged—or turned into ERPs—since the early 1980s. The year 2005 indicates the last year for which party positions are reported by the CMP, the dataset used to calculate the variables of party competition.

³ As the Belgium party system is segmented into two independent parts, referring either to the French or Flemish community, the two measures of party competition have been calculated separately for each region.

⁴ For the salience of the economic dimension, all categories of the fourth CMP domain (economy) and categories 504 (social services expansion), 505 (social services limitation), 701 (labor groups: positive), 702 (labor groups: negative), 703 (agriculture) and 704 (middle class and professional groups) were summarized.

⁵ The following CMP categories were used for the non-economic dimension: 107 (internationalism: positive), 109 (internationalism: negative), 601 (national way of life: positive), 602 (national way of life: negative), 603 (traditional morality: positive), 604 (traditional morality: negative), 605 (law and order), 607 (multiculturalism: positive), 608 (multiculturalism: negative) and 705 (minority groups).

constructed separately for each of the two dimensions, using the formula first proposed by Sigelman and Yough (1978).⁶ Graphs for the party system polarization and the salience of both dimensions are given in the appendix (Figures 1 and 2). As these graphs illustrate, both the salience as well as the polarization of each dimension of party competition vary over time and between countries. In order to provide a more straightforward overview for each party system, linear time trends have been calculated (see Table 1). A '+' indicates a positive trend, meaning that the salience or polarization of a dimension has increased. In contrast, a '-' indicates a negative trend for the period analyzed. Non-significant trends (10% level) are not displayed.

Table 1: Trends in salience and polarization for both dimensions (1980-2005)

Country	Economic dimension		Non-economic dimension		Ratio: Salience	Ratio: Polarization
	Salience	Polarization	Salience	Polarization		
Austria		-	+			
Belgium (Flanders)	-	-	+	+	-	-
Belgium (Wallonia)		-				-
Denmark	-		+	-	-	
Finland				-		
France	-	-			-	-
Germany			+	+	-	
Greece						+
Italy		+		+		
Netherlands		-	+	+		-
Norway				+		-
Portugal				-		+
Spain		+				+
Sweden		-		-		

⁶ The polarization (P) is calculated for each dimension using the formula $P = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n p_i (x_i - \bar{X})^2}{\sum_{i=1}^n p_i}$, where p_i is the vote share of party at a given election, X_i is the position of this party on a dimension of party competition, and \bar{X} is the weighted mean. \bar{X} is calculated by multiplying the vote share with the ideological position of a party. This step is repeated for each party in the party system. Finally, these values are added together. Please note that this measurement is independent of the number of parties. For the polarization measure used in this paper, it is necessary that party policy positions are measured spatially (on a range from 0 = extreme left to 10 = extreme right). While there are different ways of obtaining these values from the salience-based CMP dataset, only the approach proposed by Franzmann and Kaiser (2006) accounts for time and country-specific meanings of left and right—respectively, of liberal and authoritarian—and was therefore used for this paper.

As the table indicates, the salience of the economic dimension shows a negative trend for three countries. In these party systems, the parties pay much less attention to economic issues today than they did in the 1980s. In contrast to this development, the salience of non-economic issues has increased significantly in five of the party systems analyzed. With regard to the party system polarization, the findings are more mixed. On the economic dimension, there is a decrease in six cases, while two party systems (Italy and Spain) show higher levels of party system polarization on this dimension today than in the 1980s. Looking at the party system polarization along the non-economic dimension, a negative trend can be identified in four cases, while five party systems display increased polarization among non-economic issues.

The last two columns of the table show the trends for the ratio of the salience of economic issues compared to the salience of non-economic issues (*ratio: salience*), and for the ratio of the party system polarization among economic compared to non-economic issues (*ratio: polarization*). For these measures, the salience (polarization) of economic issues has been divided by the salience (polarization) of non-economic issues. *Ration: salience* increases when economic issues are more frequently discussed than non-economic issues; *ration: polarization* increases when the party system is more polarized with regard to economic issues than to non-economic issues. In addition to the advantage of offering one variable for each measure of party competition, this transformation is also necessary for theoretical reasons, and therefore only these two measures will be used for the subsequent analysis.⁷

The reason for this lies in the assumed effect of the variables of party competition on voters. It is argued that parties offer their programmatic appeal to voters on both dimensions simultaneously. On the basis of these appeals, voters then decide whether their vote decision should be based on their economic or their non-economic preferences. Voters therefore *compare* the policy offers made by parties on the two dimensions, which is why an absolute measure of salience or polarization for each dimension is inadequate for the subsequent analysis. When considering the trends for the two ratio-variables, every country with a significant trend for *ratio: salience* shows a decline of this during the period analyzed. This means that voters in these countries should have much less incentive to vote on the basis of their economic preferences today than they did during the 1980s. Three of the four party systems for which this negative trend is identified are also systems with strong ERPs (Denmark, France, and Flanders). With regard to the polarization variable, five countries show a significant and negative trend. In these countries, voters should have much less incentive to base their voting decisions on their economic preferences today than they did in the 1980s. In contrast, three countries show a positive trend, which means that voters in these countries now have more reason to base their

⁷ An alternative approach for dividing the economic by the non-economic measures would be to subtract them from each other. This measure is strongly correlated with the ratio-variables presented here (0.56 and 0.58, respectively). While the measures based on subtraction are much harder to interpret because of their units (especially for the salience-measure), their use does not change the empirical results presented here and in the next sections.

voting decisions on economic preferences than they did in the past. These countries are Greece, Portugal, and Spain, all countries with very marginal ERPs.

Although the presentation in this section was limited to a purely descriptive character, some results can already be summarized. There are relevant differences in terms of salience and of polarization between the two dimensions, and these differences vary both over time and between countries. Initially, the identified trends seem to correlate with the electoral success of ERPs. However, the aim of this paper is not to provide an explanation for the overall electoral success of ERPs, but to give an explanation for working-class support for these parties, as well as for variation in this support among different countries. Therefore, the variables of party competition must be combined with the individual characteristics of voters, including respondents' class as an independent variable. The resulting multi-level model is presented in the next two sections.

Data and operationalizations of variables

To test the hypotheses developed in the last sections, a multi-level model of voting behavior in Western Europe must be created. The time period covered is 1980 to 2002; the thirteen countries included are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden.⁸ This case selection facilitates the analysis of countries with very strong ERPs, as well as party systems with only marginal ERPs. While the inclusion of the latter comes at the cost of basing the results for these contexts on very few ERP voters, this strategy seems adequate, as the non-inclusion of these contexts may cause a severe selection bias with regard to the variables of party competition (Golder 2003, 2004). The model features two levels.

On the first individual level, the model includes a set of individual characteristics and attitudes, which are known from previous studies to influence the vote decision for an ERP. These variables are the respondent's *sex*, *age* (recoded as four age dummies), *education* (recoded as three education dummies), and dummies for *class*, *respectively*, *employment status* (working class, unemployed, petty bourgeoisie, and retired). In addition to these socio-demographic characteristics, the individual-level model includes two politically-oriented variables: the respondent's *left-right self-placement* and the reported *satisfaction with democracy*. The dependent variable is the binary recoded vote intention for an ERP.⁹ It is coded 1 if the respondent intends to vote for such a party, and 0 if the

⁸ Unfortunately, the *Eurobarometer Trend File* does not allow for differentiation between the Belgian regions of Flanders and Wallonia. As the two regions show quite distinct patterns of party competition (see Section Four and the respective graphs in the appendix), I have decided to delete all Belgian voters who report voting decisions for a party only contesting in the region of Wallonia. This means that the dataset used for the analysis is limited in the Belgian case to the region of Flanders, which seems appropriate as the Flemish *Vlaams Blok* is a much more prominent example for an ERP than the relatively marginal *Front Nationale* in Wallonia.

⁹ The following parties were considered to be ERPs: Front National and Allez la France (France); Vlaams Blok, Front National and Waardig ouder Worden (Belgium); Centrum Partij and Centrum Democraten (the Netherlands); Deutsche Volkunion, Die Republikaner, Nationale Partei Deutschlands, Aktion unabhängiger Deutscher, and Freisoziale Union (Germany); Movimento Sociale Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, and Lega Nord (Italy); Fremskridtspartiet and Dansk Folkeparti (Denmark); Ethniki Politiki Enosis and Politiki Anixi (Greece); Falange Espanola y de la JONS (Spain); Partido da

person would vote for any other party or does not intend to vote. All individual variables are taken from the Eurobarometer Trend File: 1970-2002 (Schmitt et al. 2005). As the dependent variable is dichotomous, a logistic regression (hierarchical generalized linear model) is applied.

The second level consists of a combination of country and year (e.g., France 1981, Germany 1996, etc.) and includes the two variables of party competition developed above, in addition to a set of control variables. Altogether, there are 164 of these second-level contexts.¹⁰ In order to test the two hypotheses stated above, the two variables of party competition presented in the last section are included on the second level. The first variable (*salience*) measures the ratio of the salience of economic to non-economic issues. Again, *salience* adopts higher values when economic issues are more frequently discussed than non-economic issues. In line with H1, I therefore expect this variable to be negatively correlated with the effect of the working-class dummy on the dependent variable. The second variable (*polarization*) accounts for the policy options available to voters. As stated previously, *polarization* adopts higher values when the party system is more polarized with regard to economic rather than non-economic issues. In line with H2, I therefore expect this variable to be negatively correlated with the effect of the working-class dummy on the dependent variable.

Additionally, the following variables were included as control variables on the second level: the standardized *unemployment rate* and the *change of this rate* compared to the previous year. Both variables were taken from the Comparative Political Data Set I: 1960-2006 (Armingeon et al. 2008). To control for the level of immigration, the share of *asylum seekers* and the *change in this rate* compared to the previous year were included as well. Both of these variables were taken from the OECD (1992, 1994, 2005). In line with the arguments made by previous studies (Arzheimer 2009; Golder 2003, 2004; Knigge 1998), the unemployment and the immigration rates can be assumed to be positively correlated with the dependent variable. To control for the possible impact of the electoral system, the *disproportionality index* by Gallagher (1991) has been included.

Results

The estimated effects of the individual and country-level variables are presented in Table 2. Due to missing data regarding the individual independent variables in the *Eurobarometer Trend File*, the number of observations at the individual level is reduced to 217.508. At the country level, missing data for the number of asylum seekers for Greece and Italy during the early 1980s reduce the number of second-level contexts to 164.

Democracia Crista (Portugal); Fremskrittspartiet (Norway); Soumen Maseudun Poulou und Perussuomalaiset (Finland); Ny Democracy (Sweden); and Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Austria).

¹⁰ For the analysis, those contexts are included in which no respondent reports a vote intention for an ERP, but where he could have voted for such a party. Countries and contexts without an ERP contesting for votes (e.g., Ireland, Luxemburg, and the United Kingdom) have been excluded. While the British National Front can clearly be regarded as a party of the extreme right, it is not coded in the *Eurobarometer Trend File*. For this reason, the United Kingdom is excluded from the analysis.

The table reports two models. Model 1 shows the estimated main effects for the individual and the second-level variables. With only two exceptions (the retired dummy and the dummy for medium education), all b-coefficients of the individual-level variables are in line with the findings of previous studies and are statistically significant at the 5 percent level. Even after controlling for other individual variables, being a member of the working class strongly increases the probability of voting for an ERP. A test for random slopes for all individual level variables shows that the slopes of only four variables (satisfaction with democracy, left-right self-placement, sex, and the dummy for higher education) turned out to be statistically significant and therefore vary between the contexts. The slopes of these variables have thus been set as random.

Table 2: Results of multi-level models

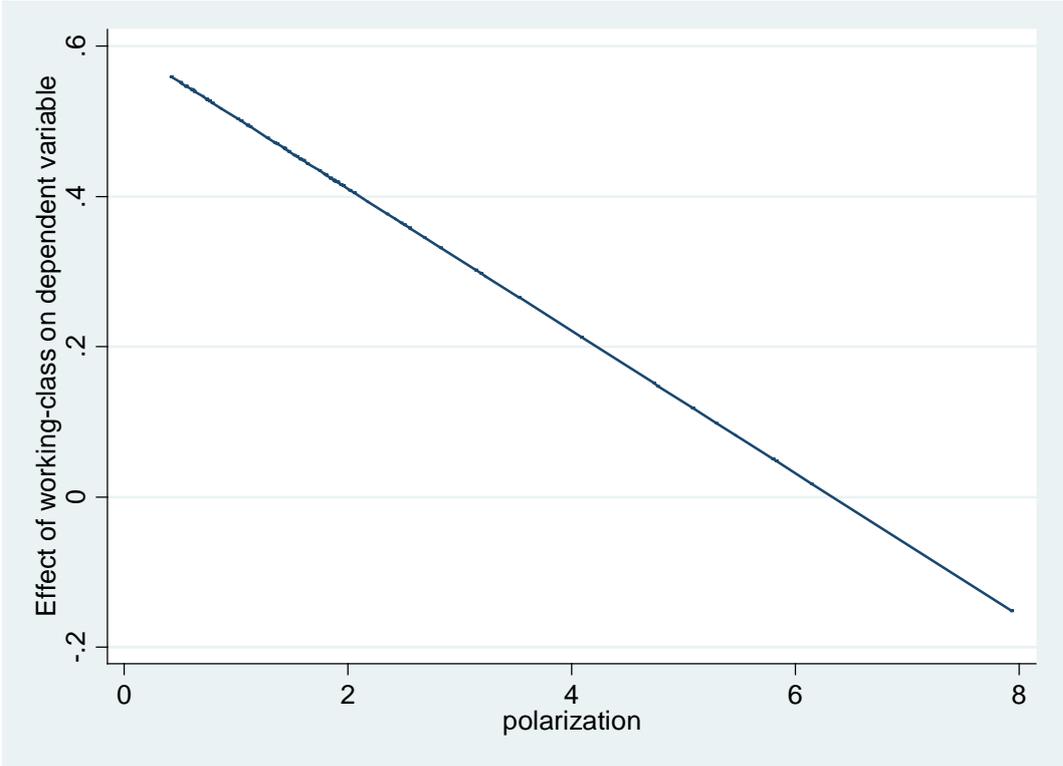
	Model (1)		Model (2)	
	Coefficient	s. e.	Coefficient	s. e.
1st level variables				
Working-class	0.424 **	0.040	0.637 **	0.097
Unemployed	0.518 **	0.056	0.520 **	0.069
Petty Bourgeoisie	0.105 *	0.055	0.099 *	0.055
Retired	0.039	0.053	0.038	0.058
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.786 **	0.037	-0.788 **	0.036
Left-right self placement	0.502 **	0.021	0.502 **	0.021
Sex (male)	0.557 **	0.043	0.552 **	0.043
Age (25 to 45 years)	-0.272 **	0.043	-0.269 **	0.037
Age (46 to 64 years)	-0.482 **	0.047	-0.481 **	0.048
Age (older than 65 years)	-0.649 **	0.068	-0.648 **	0.069
Education (medium)	0.005	0.036	0.0007	0.039
Education (high)	-0.458 **	0.054	-0.455 **	0.057
2nd level variables				
Intercept (2nd level)	-4.674 **	0.626	-4.727 **	0.681
Unemployment	-0.108 *	0.042	-0.108 *	0.043
Δ Unemployment	0.084	0.122	0.081	0.117
Asylum seekers	0.042 *	0.017	0.040 *	0.016
Δ Asylum seekers	-0.012	0.023	-0.011	0.017
Disprop. of elect. sys.	-0.017	0.028	-0.017	0.029
Salience	-0.128 *	0.043	-0.1240 **	0.037
Polarization	0.001	0.080	0.029	0.084
Interaction effects				
Working-class*salience	-	-	-0.012	0.024
Working-class*polarization	-	-	-0.093 **	0.023
Variance Components				
Intercept 2nd level (u ₀)	3.649 **	942.179	3.658**	939.306
SATISDMO slope,	0.105 **	484.910	0.324 **	485.776
LRS slope,	0.046 **	887.595	0.214 **	880.690
SEX slope	0.094 **	227.469	0.304 **	225.978
EDUC_HIG slope	0.100 **	208.569	0.297 *	200.434
Number of level 1 units	217.508		217.508	
Number of level 2 units	164		164	

Regarding the variables of party competition, Model 1 shows that the salience of economic versus non-economic issues has a negative impact on the voting decision for an ERP. As this variable

adopts higher values when the economic dimension is of greater salience than the non-economic dimension, this effect matches the predictions made in Section Three. When party competition is primarily based upon economic issues, this is unfavorable to a voter's intention to support an ERP. In contrast, the polarization of the economic versus the non-economic dimension does not turn out to be of statistical significance, at least not as a main effect for all voters.

Model 2 accounts for possible interaction effects between the working-class dummy and the variables of party competition. As the model shows, there is a significant and negative interaction effect between the polarization variable and the working-class dummy. This means that in contexts in which parties are more polarized among economic rather than among non-economic issues, the positive impact of being member of the working class on the voting decision in favor of an ERP is strongly reduced, a finding that supports H2. Figure 1 shows the impact of this cross-level interaction effect.

Figure 3: Cross-level interaction effect between polarization and working-class dummy



As can be seen in the figure above, the effect of being a member of the working class on the voting decision in support of an ERP is sharply reduced in contexts where parties are more polarized among economic rather than among non-economic issues. For every unit that party system polarization increases, the effect of being a member of the working class on the voting decision for an ERP is reduced by 0.093 units. Furthermore, and as Table 3 shows, the identified interaction effect is significant for all values of the polarization variable, which provides further support for H2.

Table 3: Slopes and t-values of working-class dummy for different values of polarization

	Polarization at value	Effect of working-class on dependent variable	t-value
Polarization (minimum)	0.420	0.343**	7.729
Polarization (25% percentile)	0.868	0.302**	6.099
Polarization (mean)	2.280	0.168*	2.344
Polarization (75% percentile)	2.508	0.146*	1.932
Polarization (maximum)	7.930	-0.367*	-1.974

If a party system is more divided on economic issues, working-class voters tend to vote on the basis of their economic preferences because, on this dimension of party competition, their votes can be expected to make the greatest difference in policy outcome. Under these considerations, working-class voters will support a party of the economic left and not an ERP. However, if parties are more divided on non-economic issues (including the extreme right's core issues), working-class voters will making voting decisions on the basis of their authoritarian non-material preferences, which increases the probability that they will cast their votes for an ERP.

Conclusion

The analysis in the previous section has clearly shown that variables of party competition explain a large part of the variance in working-class support for ERPs. In contexts where the economic dimension is more polarized than the non-economic dimension, the positive impact of being member of the working class on the voting decision for an ERP is strongly reduced. With regard to this result, Mudde's conclusion that 'it's not the economy, stupid' (2007: 119) should be read more carefully. While there is strong evidence that ERP voters do not support these parties because of their economic appeal and that economic issues are of only minor importance for the ideology of ERPs, the decline in polarization of the economic dimension of party competition nonetheless has influenced the electoral fortunes of ERPs by providing these parties with a favorable political opportunity structure to mobilize voters on their non-material core issues. However, the analysis in this paper also points out that different voter groups are affected differently by party competition variables. Future research should

therefore focus on interaction effects between party competition and the political preferences of voters, an issue that could not be addressed using the Eurobarometer data.

The results presented in this article also reveal a link between the rise of the extreme right and a phenomenon that has also attracted considerable scientific interest during the last two decades: the decline of class-based voting (Clark and Lipset 2001; Evans 1999). As earlier studies in this field (Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Sartori 1969) have assumed and more recent literature on the conditions of class voting indicates (Achterberg 2006; Achterberg and Houtman 2006; Elff 2007, 2009; Evans et al. 1999), working-class voters will only make election decisions on the basis of their economic interests, if these interests are politicized by political parties. Parties can decide which issues are politicized for electoral competition, and these choices directly impact individuals' voting behaviors (Achterberg and Houtman 2006; Crewe 1992; Sartori, 1969). It can therefore be concluded that the decline of the economic dimension of party competition—or the decline of class-based politics—has certainly influenced two distinct phenomena: the rise of the extreme right and the decline in class-based voting.

With regard to democratic representation, two conclusions can be drawn from this article. First, voters with both economic left and non-economic right preferences are as well represented today as they were decades ago. However, while in the past, left-wing parties attracted these voters based on their economic but not on their non-economic preferences, this pattern has changed. Today, many of these voters support political parties of the extreme right, which offer representation for their authoritarian attitudes without paying attention to their economic demands. Working-class voters are therefore as well represented as they have been in the past, as there is nearly no party in Western Europe that combines left-wing economic principles with right-wing, non-material ideals. Second, this article calls into question those studies that have argued that the decline of class-based voting is mainly caused by the fact that class differences among voters have decreased and that have thus praised this development as a victory of democratic conflict resolution (Franklin et al. 1992). If working-class voters have turned away from the political left, only to turn to the extreme right—because they no longer feel represented in economic terms by the former—this suggests that the rise of the extreme right will continue in the future. Changes in the composition of the electorate, amplified economic competition and integration in Europe strongly suggest that the decline of economic policy options will remain constant, and as this paper has shown, this trend is favorable to the electoral success of ERPs.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Saliency of economic and non-economic issues in Western European party systems

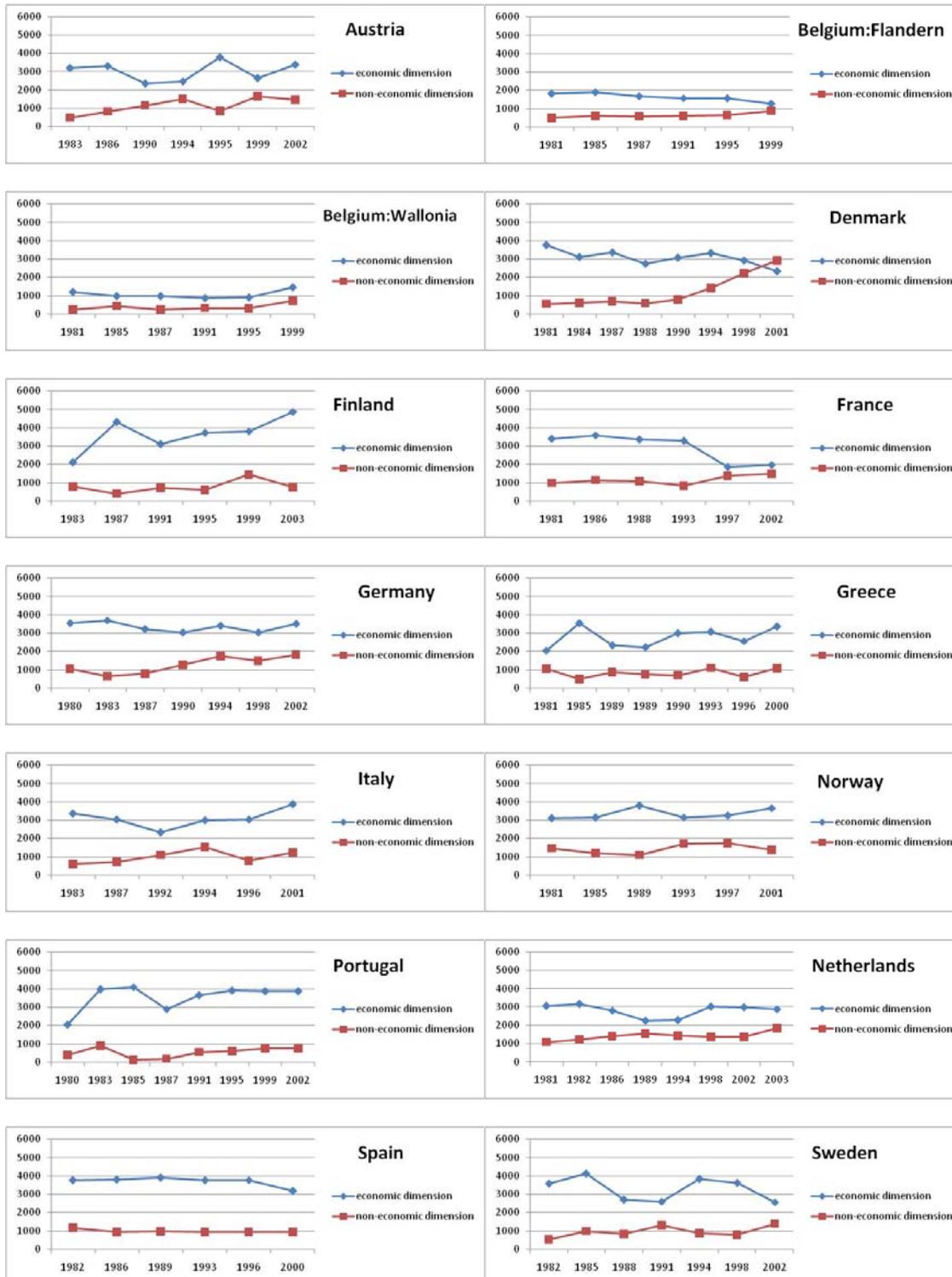
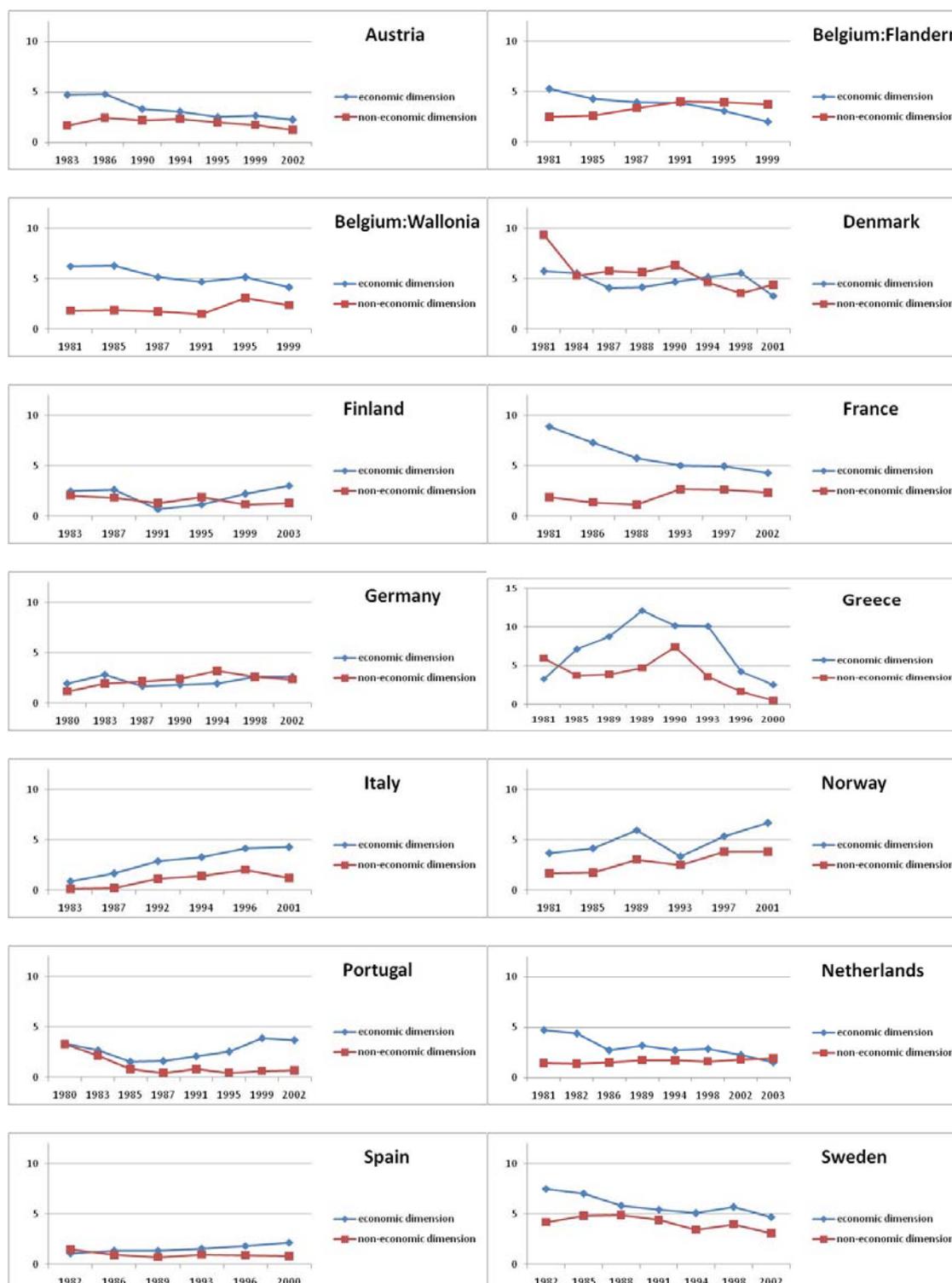


Figure 2: Party system polarization among economic and non-economic issues in Western Europe



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