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## Europe's novel political cultures in the early twenty-first century

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Within the five short years since the European Parliamentary elections in 1999 Europe's political spectrum has undergone a profound change. In the course of national elections held in EU member states in that time-span, a shift in governments' composition, political style and public sensitivities denotes the emergence of novel political cultures in Europe. These cultures escape the left-right political identifications that have been dominant over the past century. By way of articulating similarities in the electoral dynamics in EU member-states in the past five years this study discerns the signs of this transformation in the European political cultures, as a result of which the left-right alignment along economic policies is being obliterated by a new fault-line: one which is dictated by the security-risk dilemma of the 'new economy'.

### Electoral shifts to the right at the turn of the century

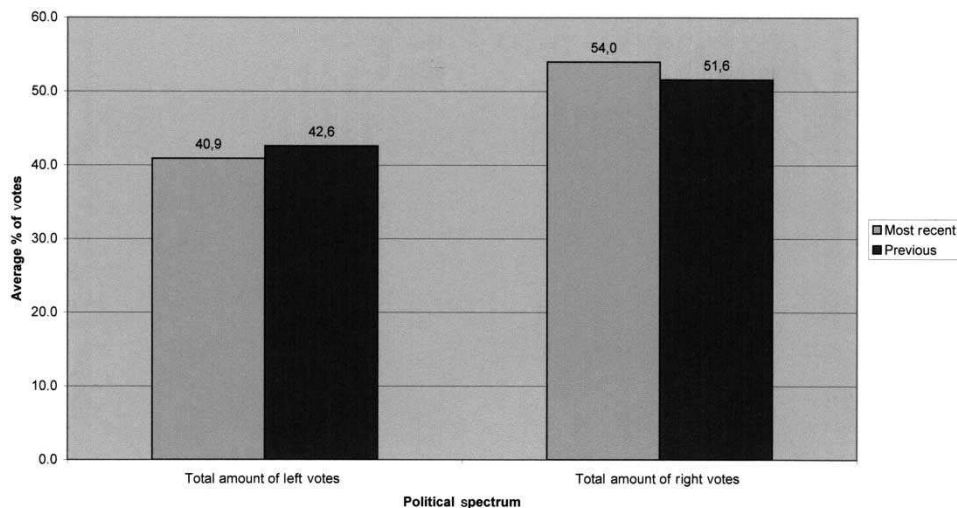
Four phenomena have shaped the political environment at the start of the new century: The rise of the extreme right, recent electoral victories of centre-right formations, the ideological shift of some traditional centre-left parties to the right (*Third Way*, or *Etat Social Actif* in French parlance), and the relative decrease of electoral support to traditional, non-reformed, left parties.<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, the recent political dynamics seem to be marked by the left's decline: eleven of the EU's fifteen countries had socialist governments by the late nineties. The exceptions were Spain, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Ireland. The 1999 elections for the European Parliament already signalled a general tendency of decline in voter support for the left and a parallel increase of support for the right, with a rise of 5.5 and a drop of 4 percentage points, respectively, compared to the 1994 elections.<sup>2</sup> The last rounds of general elections in EU member-states (from the beginning of 1999 to early 2004) brought a series of shifts to the right throughout Europe. Seven of the fifteen EU governments (Denmark, France, Portugal, Italy, Netherlands, Austria, Greece) shifted in composition from left- to right-wing. Internal shifts to the right within the ruling rainbow coalitions occurred in four of them (Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Finland). By early 2004, only three EU member-states had preserved the dominance of centre-left parties in government: Britain, Germany, and Sweden. No shift took place from right to left in the formation of new governments before March 2004, when the Spanish socialists won a surprise victory over the

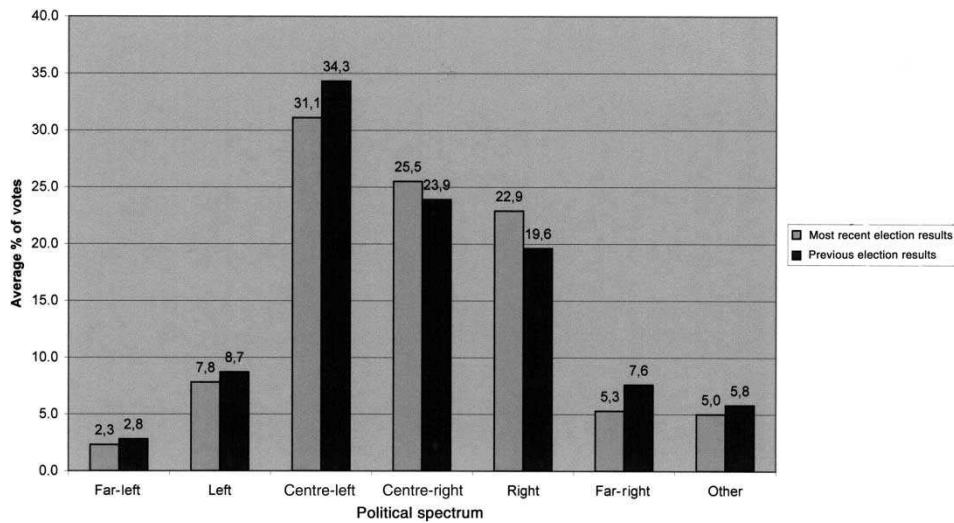
incumbent centre-right Popular Party which had a comfortable lead in polls before the terrorist attacks in Madrid three days prior to elections instigated a sharp reversal in public support.

At the turn of the century, the shift to the right deepened in the countries that already had right-wing governments by the mid-nineties: Spain, Belgium, Luxembourg and Ireland. Where the ascendancy of left parties was preserved—Britain, Germany, Sweden and, until recently, Greece—it was due largely to an internal shift to the right in the parties' policy orientation, embracing a formula of social liberalism, in the style of Tony Blair's 'Third Way'.

The series of shifts to the right in the structures of national governance throughout Europe seem to indicate a stable shift in voter's preferences and consequently, a realignment in favour of the right. Yet, comparative results from the two last rounds of national elections show that, at least numerically, the left-right balance throughout Europe has not been significantly disturbed (Figures 1–2). Remarkably, a discrepancy between governmental shift to the right and popular support for the left can be observed in the majority of member-states. This discrepancy invalidates the thesis of stable realignment in favour of the right. To be able to understand the nature of the recent electoral dynamics in Europe, electoral outcomes should be examined in the light of the evolution of the welfare state, as precisely this evolution has been the backdrop of political mobilization in recent years. From that perspective, rather than a stable realignment to the right, the reviewed shift to the right appears to be a vote against a certain political culture and style of governance which, in different varieties, had established itself throughout Europe in the past four decades. This perspective will lead us to identify the vote, first, as a *protest* vote: a reaction to a civil and political crisis of the system of governance (the state) and of policy-making (the parties) in Europe. Further, we will advance the hypothesis that this critical vote is part of a larger and more stable transformation of Europe's political cultures away from the left-right alignment along economic policies, signalling the formation of a novel ideological axis.



**Figure 1.** Left vs. right in past two parliamentary elections.



**Figure 2.** Comparing results from the previous two parliamentary elections of EU member states.

### From quantitative to qualitative reading: the political cultures of the European welfare states

The post-war welfare state consensus in Europe was enabled as much by the centrist nature of European conservatism as it was by the strong leverage of organized labour. Most of the conservative parties in continental Europe never embraced totally free-market capitalism; instead, they opted for a 'social market' economy. Thus, the centrist conservatism of the German Christian Democrats, for instance, provided a comfortable institutional framework for the welfare state in much of Germany's post-war existence (it has been the largest party in every election except in 1972 and 1998).<sup>3</sup> The conservative-socialist overlap on social policies made possible the red-blue coalitions in most governments with proportional electoral systems, such as the Netherlands and Belgium. Recent ideological shifts of socialist parties to the right would seem only to confirm and strengthen the consensual centrism on which the welfare state is founded. However, it is this very consensus and the style of politics it generated, more than the alleged unsustainability of its economic and social policies, which has eroded the welfare state as a form of relationship between citizens and governments.

Decades of conservative-socialist governmental cohabitation, and the continuing loss of ideological distinctions between centre-left and centre-right brought about professionalized political establishments marked by a style of politics based on elite policy making, compromise and consensus, increased bureaucratization, absence of political debate or involvement of civil society. Throughout Europe, ruling establishments were discredited by mismanagement and corruption scandals in the nineties. To recall just a few examples: in Belgium, the Dutroux scandal exposed grave weaknesses of the justice system. Later, the hormone and dioxin scandals here revealed the absence of control over intensive industrial agriculture, especially in Flanders. The Augusta helicopter scandal

exposed corrupt political and financial practices that especially hit the socialists, leading to a spectacular trial of numerous Socialist Party personalities in late 1998. In France, the contaminated blood case and a series of corruption allegations against leading left- and right-wing politicians had a similar effect. A sequence of administrative failures in the Netherlands allowed for a systematic defiance of safety regulations and led to the eruption of fireworks factory in 2000, and a fire at a café that killed 14 young people at New Year's Eve 2000–1. These instances of political mismanagement increased public sensitivity to governance deficiency throughout Europe.

In further support of the protest vote hypothesis is the fact that the fall of incumbents at the century's turn was carried out in conditions of good economic growth and low unemployment. Despite the extraordinary prosperity that Europeans enjoyed in the late nineties, the sense of anxiety and insecurity at an everyday level was steadily growing, paralleled by a general loss of confidence in governments. Despite economic growth, problems with the health system, schools, public transportation, as well as growing urban violence, intensified. The fact that national governments had done so well in economic terms made these problems ever so harder to accept.<sup>4</sup> Populist leaders (from Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands, to Haider in Austria and Le Pen in France) mobilized unprecedented support by alleging that political establishments had left the society in ruins. They made a link between the failure of some groups to become integrated into society and crime, and managed to mobilize a widespread social dissatisfaction with an administrative model of consensus building and avoiding conflict at the price of escaping political responsibility.

In that sense, the tumbling of political incumbents in Europe in the late nineties, combined with increased support for extreme right parties, can be seen as a vote of non-confidence equally for the centre-left and centre-right establishments that had dominated the political scene since the Second World War. Rather than a genuinely right vote, this was a vote against a certain style of old consensus politics void of clear principles and marked by privatization of the public interest and short-term expediency.

Two particular electoral signals present further the critical vote not as a simple realignment to the right, but as formation of a new political culture: the persistent decline in voter turnout at elections, and the rise of support to alternative political formations.

Researchers have repeatedly noted a long-term decline in people's trust in institutions over the past three decades. (This trend is often halted by economic and political crisis, as the current Iraq emergency.) The growing political apathy is manifesting itself in a low and decreasing turnout at elections throughout Europe.<sup>5</sup> The continually declining levels of electoral turnout points to an incipient crisis of democratic legitimacy, caused by the sore relationship between state and society. The consensual democracy of the European welfare state seems to be degenerating into what David Arter has named a 'demobilising polity'.<sup>6</sup> Quite significantly, participation is not only low among the most disadvantaged groups (a sad, but widely spread phenomenon linked to socio-economic determinants of political culture); it is also declining among young, well-educated urban voters.

The thesis that low turnout is indicative of a tacit revolt or, alternatively, of civic alienation is not, however, uncontested. Low turnout is a probable outcome

of a change in the significance attributed to party systems, which is part of a broader shift in the way people perceive the role of the citizen in democracy: fewer and fewer regard the electoral vote as a civil duty or an effective instrument for influencing the political agenda. Indeed, non-electoral political mobilization (from protest movements to special interest lobbying) is steadily on the increase. This means that declining electoral participation is not an unequivocal sign of civil alienation, but of shift in what citizens perceive as valuable and efficient channels for political input. From that perspective, the combination between decline in electoral activity and the rise of non-electoral mobilization is another sign for the emergence of new political cultures in Europe.

In many European countries, unconventional parties have lately become the beneficiaries of the above-described discontent with mainstream politicians and entrenched political hierarchies, or discontent with politics, altogether. The quest for a new political culture has prompted the development of new parties or movements (such as the *White March* movement in Belgium, *Attack* in France, the *Margherita* alliance in Italy) or the refoundation and 'renewal' of existing parties. A new left political force came into the political scene in Portugal: *Bloco de Esquerda* (the *Left Block*, comprising the *UDP*, *PSP* and *Politica XXI*), and attracted over 2.46 per cent with two deputies to the Assembly. In Ireland, the *Sinn Féin*, an anti-establishment, all-Ireland party with a progressive social agenda, had the most significant percentage rise in the 2000 general elections.<sup>7</sup> Its electoral message was focused on rejection of old politics: 'We are a party that offers a real alternative to the stale and corrupt politics that have marked life here for long. We are asking people to join with us in building an Ireland of equals', announced Sinn Féin's leader Gerry Adams. The rise of new parties is all the more significant because it goes against the trend of small parties' terminal decline in increasingly bipolarized political systems.

The preceding analysis established that the shifts to right-wing rule in Europe do not necessarily indicate a long-term electoral advantage for the right. Nor was the vote a simple protest vote against left political establishments. Although at first sight it appears that concerns with order and security draw the vote to the right, in fact the protest vote was cast against the old consensus politics of the welfare state which, in many cases, were seen by voters as oblivious of the changing social realities in Europe and linked to establishment's complacency. The electoral dynamics in the past five years indicate growing demand throughout European publics for a new political style of governance and a change in policy priorities to address new themes such as ethical issues, democracy, stability and openness.

### **The withering of the left-right alignment**

Although, as electoral results show, numerically the left-right balance is not disturbed, it is the very left-right divide which is becoming obscured. We are witnessing an end of left-right ideological vectors, driven by capital-vs.-labour dynamics, and stretching between the pole of free enterprise against that of (re)distribution.

Since the late eighteenth century, when the terms 'left' and 'right' entered the vocabulary of politics in France and spread throughout Europe, the nature of the left-right cleavage has changed significantly a number of times. It was

only after the Second World War that the left–right divide started to be based primarily on the issues of free enterprise and state control of the economy. This constellation lasted until recently. A number of studies in the last two decades have begun to observe new shifts in the basis of political alignment. Thus, according to Jean Lapouze, the only stable core element of the left–right contrasts now is ‘powers that be’ on the right and ‘the weak’ on the left, with ‘left’ and ‘right’ being a spatial translation of ‘up–down’.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from being a protest vote against the centre-left and centre-right political establishment, the most recent elections seem to indicate a more specific and radical shift in Europe’s political cultures, deepening the crisis of left–right ideological identifications through the appearance of new vectors of political alignment. As it will be advanced further, this new fault-line in politics is the *risk–opportunity* dilemma of the ‘new economy’—the novel socio-economic constellation that appeared in post-industrial societies in the 1990s and is now dividing constituencies according to the unequal distribution of opportunities and risks.

The emerging new alignment is signalled by two phenomena reoccurring at national elections throughout Europe in recent years: changes in the political agenda and the merging of left and right ideological programmes.

The nature of the agenda of political debate throughout Europe has changed (both in terms of public sensitivities and official political discourse), moving beyond the left–right divide over economic policies along the poles of free enterprise and redistribution. psephologists (specialists in elections analysis) have established that, until recently, elections tended to be won on governments’ economic record, in line with the traditional (at least since the late nineteenth century) left–right alignment on social policies. Surveys of general elections since 1998 reveal almost uniformly that this is no longer the case. Apart from the usual focus on personalities rather than policies, analysts of national elections in Europe at the very beginning of the new century often recorded a remarkable absence of debate on social policies. Economic issues seemed to be disappearing from the electoral agenda. For the first time in many years campaigns were no longer centred on taxation, unemployment levels and redistribution, but on political and economic insecurity. The omission of economics from the agenda of recent electoral campaigning does not necessarily suggest that economics is not a relevant political issue. Quite the contrary, labour-market reforms are recently at the focus of policy-making; yet the marginalization of these issues in election campaigning is due to the consensus on necessary reform of the welfare state across the left–right ideological spectrum.

The formation of the new insecurity agenda in recent years has been prompted by voters’ perceptions on the growing salience of the following four large social trends.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Physical unsafety*

The massive spread of terrorist threats (after 11 September 2001, but also before these attacks) has brought issues of political security (safety) to the fore; this has coincided with a rise in urban criminality: cities have witnessed a growth in crime, especially juvenile delinquency. Public anxiety has also been increased by ‘diseases coming from abroad’, such as BSE or SARS, or drugs).

### *Immigration*

Immigration has intensified and deepened protectionist instincts in society.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that the perception of the growing salience of immigration is not necessarily a consequence of immigration growth. Ghettoization, rather than the volume of immigration, is at the route of growing societal concern. While public anxiety grew over cultural mixity, which the larger public perceived as a source of dropping standards of living (diminishing educational standards at schools, for instance), the whole subject of immigration in the second half of the twentieth century was placed at the margins of political respectability, thus making it a taboo topic. Behind political correctness, which silenced political forms of expression of social concerns, frustrations throughout societies grew.

### *Political crisis and democratic deficit*

Endemic mismanagement and instances of corruption have undermined confidence in the established mechanisms of political and economic governance. As mentioned earlier, a series of scandals in the nineties exposed dysfunction of the state and party system.

### *Economic slowdown and employment insecurity*

Economic growth in Europe in the past two years has stalled or declined in a number of EU member-states while unemployment is on the rise, together with eroding standards of social security.

Surveys throughout Europe indicate the growing salience of the safety agenda: restoration of the rule of law and political ethics become public priorities, often overtaking the economic and social agenda. As a result, right-wing populism stormed onto the political scene in the late nineties campaigning to stop new immigration, fight crime and rebuild neglected public services. Labour in the Netherlands lost nearly half its seats in parliament to Fortuyn's populist party in 2002. Opinion polls in Netherlands prior to the January 2003 general elections showed that the second priority (after fighting crime and increasing security) was a call for the restoration of 'norms and values', a kind of moral renewal inviting a return to civil behaviour, respect for the law and an end to fraudulent business and political practices.<sup>11</sup>

The rise of right-wing populism at the very beginning of the century is being followed now by mainstreaming of the extreme-right political agenda: the Fortuyn, Haider and Le Pen legacy has changed Dutch, Austrian and French politics by imposing their agenda and pulling all mainstream parties to the right. Although right-wing populism is currently receding, public preferences for order and stability do not falter. In fact, it is the incorporation of the safety discourse into the political rhetoric of mainstream left and right parties that explains the withdrawal of support to right-wing populism, not the diminished relevance of the security-and-order agenda.

The sense of uncertainty which has been gathering momentum throughout despite the economic boom of the mid-nineties is being currently increased by three factors. First, the enlargement of the EU to include ten East European countries as of May 2004 finds the population of EU member-states uninformed



and unprepared. This risks enhancing cultural prejudices and thus deepening the current protectionist instincts. Secondly, whether or not Europeans have actually been more exposed to terrorist attacks, populations have become aware of their societies' vulnerability to terrorism.

The most important factor in intensifying the sense of uncertainty, however, has been the recent deterioration of the economic environment in Europe, after the economic boom of the late nineties. The peak in the Nasdaq stock index (of the technology industry) was in March 2000; what followed were two-and-a-half years of disastrous plunge. Economic stagnation has spread throughout Europe reaching Germany, France and the Netherlands. The noticeable weakening of growth in the eurozone and the diminishing consumer confidence throughout Europe are deepened further by the uncertainty over possible outcomes of the Iraq's reconstruction effort.<sup>12</sup> Despite recent signs of prospects for economic recovery, the experience of economic decline, which followed the unprecedented economic boom of the nineties, has induced a lasting shift in public attitudes towards protectionism.

Overall, as a response to these new social trends, a new agenda of order and anxiety has appeared with four constitutive elements: *physical* security, *political* order, *cultural* estrangement and employment insecurity, as the *economic* component of the mix. There have not been major policy alternatives to address the theme of insecurity—analysts have observed repeatedly that there have been few programmatic differences to distinguish between the major parties at the last rounds of national elections. This has prompted authors to observe that the opposition between left and right seems less clear-cut at the end of the nineties.<sup>13</sup>

A palpable phenomenon signalling the fusion of left and right policy agendas is the recent shift of the centre-left towards the right. Socialist establishment almost uniformly undertook, in a varied ratio between politics and rhetoric, a shift to the right, first initiated by the British Labour Party led by Tony Blair. With this, centre-left parties in continental Europe started to overlap with the centrist position of conservative parties of the Christian Democrat family. With the exception of Britain, European conservative parties after the Second World War never completely embraced *laissez-faire* capitalism and instead adopted a centrist position in terms of economic policies. With this, conservative parties in continental Europe early on occupied the centre of the left–right political spectre. The exceptional for Europe placement of the British Conservative Party clearly to the right provided the vacant space in the centre of the left–right alignment that New Labour took in the late nineties. This could not be the case in Europe, where the socialist parties' move to the right made them overlap with the conservatives who had already taken the centrist space. In Italy and Greece it is the centre-left parties that have recently surpassed the centre-right in their new espousal of labour-market flexibility. Indeed, a shift to the right in the style of Blair's 'Third Way' was undertaken also by Italy's centre-left (Social Democrats) in the late nineties. We must note, however, that the motivations behind the shift to economic liberalism of the Italian social democrats are different from the shift of British labour to the right. Interventionism in Italy has been associated with the right (in a 'cooperation' between economic and political elites), and recent centre-left governments have sought to liberalize Italy's political economy in order to benefit the nation as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

With these shifts the Third Way, or social liberalism, has become the predom-

inant policy paradigm in Europe, currently being embraced not only by leaders of centre-left parties, such as France's Lionel Jospin and Germany's Gerhard Schröder, but also by traditional conservatives such as Spain's José María Aznar, as well as many German Christian Democrats. The current policy orientation of the French centre-right (the ruling RPR-UDF<sup>1</sup> coalition under Chirac) can also be characterized safely as a form of a Third Way (state-directed social liberalism), as it displays all the main elements of this paradigm.

### **The novel political cultures of Europe: social roots and political essence**

If the above-mentioned developments indicate the withering of the left-right cleavage in politics they, by themselves, are not a sufficient evidence of the appearance of new political cultures, that is, of new ideological axis of alignment beyond left and right. Thus, the recent shift of socialism to the right could be seen as a simple re-enforcement of the red-blue centrism typical of the welfare state throughout the eighties. However, in the rest of this analysis we will argue that the nature of political centrism itself has undergone a change in the nineties, and thus given rise to new political cultures. At the root of this change are the deep socio-economic transformations in Europe caused by the transition towards high-tech, post-industrial global economy in the nineties. This, in turn, has been translated into the appearance of new *risk-opportunity* political vectors, expressed at three levels: (1) the new ideological basis of party competition, (2) new social basis of party support and (3) new poles of political alignment.

The broad social background of the current changes in political identification has been the spectacular economic growth of the eighties and nineties in all major post-industrial societies, growth enabled by the revolutionary shift towards sophisticated forms of technology. Analysts tend to describe the new stage of the post-industrial constellation in the broad terms of the 'knowledge society', or the 'high-tech' economies. Indeed, the relevance of specialized knowledge in modern societies is ever-increasing. Yet, fundamentally, all modern societies are knowledge-based societies, which makes the term 'knowledge society' inadequate to the qualitative changes now taking place: it fails to grasp the tensions and transformations triggered by the economic developments at the turn of the century.

The new economy (the high-technology stage of the post-industrial, global economies) has induced profound changes in the organization of work and lifestyle patterns throughout society. It revolutionized existing social and occupational structures, diversified the forms of ownership and created new career opportunities and flexible employment options, which in turn increased personal chances and lifetime choices.

The most significant social impact of the new economy has been the flexibilization of existing class distinctions due to increased professional mobility and the proliferation of forms of ownership and tenure within a person's lifetime. Throughout the twentieth century, occupational categories, such as 'blue-collar' and 'white-collar' workers, had already infused economic class distinctions. However, the new economy increases the speed of entry and exit between professional and social groups, thus putting an end to the relative fixity of personal identity to one occupational/class group within an adult lifetime. What gains maximum relevance for people is their chance (and not existing position)

of upward, or risk of downward, mobility. Hence, the increased salience of the risk–opportunity vectors in politics, which start to exist in parallel with the old capital–labour orientation of left and right, and often replace them. The transition towards the high-tech global post-industrial economy in the nineties is replacing the old socialist–conservative consensus on the welfare state with a new division along the lines of the opportunity vs. risk dilemma of the new economy. In this sense, the socialists' shift to the right is symptomatic of a new type of alignment formed along the themes of employment security and risk, rather than the capital–labour dynamics of conflict.

It is too early to make a full anamnesis of the social dynamics brought about by the new economy. What can be established with certainty at this early stage of the change is that the recent transformations and the intensity of pace they take have inserted a sense of insecurity even for those fractions of the population that were considered the uncontested winners of the technological boom of the nineties. This at least partly accounts for the dominance of 'order' and 'security' themes in current political discourse, and thus to the cultural orientation of voters to the right.

As a result of the political shifts analysed earlier in the study, the current political agenda in Europe is dominated by a fusion between centre-right and centre-left platforms into a new policy paradigm which combines a stress on safety and authority (inherited from the traditional political right) and an emphasis on economic liberalism and labour flexibility (the core of Third Way's social liberalism). Hence, although the political families of the left and right still exist nominally, they have converted into a common ideological platform, centred on the opportunities inherent in the new economy. On the other side of the political spectrum are parties and their constituencies for which the new economy incurs rising risks: the fruits of labour-market flexibility, which translate into lower incomes and reduced social protection.

Therefore, despite preserved differences in political culture, we can assert that the new policy axis that aligns the old centres and the old extremes is the *opportunity–risk* divide of the new economy. On this basis a realignment is taking place between centre and periphery between, on one hand, the centre-left and centre-right midpoint and, on the other hand, the circumference of far-right and radical-left parties. In this new alignment, the new centre (a simultaneous shift of the moderate left and right to the centre) becomes one of the poles in the political axis, embracing the 'opportunity' side of the dilemma, while the far-right and radical-left constitute the opposite pole responding to societal fears of the hazards of the new economy of increased competition and open borders.<sup>16</sup> This means that the old socialist–conservative consensus on the welfare state which already blurred the ideological divide between the political left and right, now under the impact of the new economy is being replaced by a left–right consensus on the politics of 'opportunity', opposed by the far-right and radical-left protectionist drive.<sup>17</sup>

Differences between centre-left and centre-right are being effaced not only in terms of ideology and policy but also in terms of societal alliances and bases of mobilization. Thus, the traditionally strong link between social democratic/labour parties and trade unions is rapidly weakening (most striking current example is Germany). Symptomatic of the declining relevance of the left–right divide are also changes in the social composition of constituencies. Thus, surveys

of the last French elections indicate that the typical voter for the socialists is female, aged 25–30, educated and in middle or higher management or the civil service, rather than the quintessential blue-collar male worker. The socio-professional profile of the Le Pen constituency is working and middle class: male, young (20 per cent), blue-collar (one in three), unemployed, self-employed and small traders.<sup>18</sup> The right (such as the German CDU or Austrian ÖVP or the three rightist parties forming the Italian government) has a more or less firm grip on those strata that can be appealed to through anti-establishment, anti-foreigner and anti-European populism. Most successful has been the far-right vote in areas where it can rely on subnationalist mobilization: Flanders, Northern Ireland and Spain. However, there seems to be a strong second classifier, other than class divisions, which currently determines voter's preference of parties. This classifier is the attitudes to employment possibilities along the risk-vs.-opportunity divide brought by the new economy.

The old left and right extremes have come to overlap on two policy lines: first, in their protectionist reaction to economic and social risk; and secondly, in their increasing preference to national, at the expense of international, solidarity. The fear of competition from immigrants on the low-skills labour market fosters the traditional blue-collar constituencies of the radical left to embrace, albeit tacitly, a nationalist reaction to global borders. The main lines of ideological divergence that survive seem to be of purely cultural nature: the cultural conservatism of the far-right vs. the cultural liberalism of the radical left.

Certainly, this is not the first time that the issue of insecurity and risk has driven the redefinition of left and right political ideologies. The social security policies of the post-war welfare state were a particular political reaction to the opportunity–risk dilemma of industrial societies. The dilemma itself had already appeared in the mid-nineteenth century and furnished the ideological divide between socialism and liberalism, moving economic liberalism to the right of the main ideological divide.<sup>19</sup> The classical nineteenth-century cultures of economic liberalism and socialist solidarity saw industrial capitalism from the incompatible perspective of growing risks and opportunities for their respective constituencies (labour and capital). The post-war welfare state managed to bridge the opportunity–risk divide through a variety of social policies that aimed mainly at minimization of risk (rather than increase of opportunities) as well a larger distribution of the costs of risk-minimization. What we now witness is the re-emergence of the opportunity–risk dilemma, this time in the context of post-industrial, knowledge economies. The substance of the dilemma is now different because behind it stand new mechanisms of social (re)production and stratification, which are in turn translated into new grounds of political alignment and party loyalty. The crux of the change is that certain kinds of knowledge linked to the technological revolution of the late twentieth century (and not knowledge as such) replace the 'ownership of means of production' category in the stratification logic which in the late nineteenth century prompted the opportunity–risk divide between the culture of economic enterprise vs. the culture of state-sponsored social solidarity.

Most significantly for this analysis, the rapid diffusion of information and communication technologies has incurred changes in work organization, which have created new status cleavages. For certain professional categories the new economy has meant increased employment opportunities, rapid career advance-

ment and valuable job flexibility. Indeed, the pursuit of more than one career in a lifetime is gaining ground among the younger generations in Europe. Studies show that increasing number of professionals in their thirties and forties are leaving stable well-paid jobs—not because of the economic downturn but to gain more control over their lives. This has been beneficial for some of the traditionally weaker sections of the population, such as mothers, allowing them the flexibility they needed to combine child-rearing with a career.

Arguably, one of the most apparent social consequences of the globalized high-tech economies is the increase of the middle class: due to intensified global competition and the decoupling of many corporations, the weight of small business would be increasing—small owners who have enriched themselves during the stock-market boom and the economic recovery of the late nineties. Within that hypothesis, the turn to liberalism would express the preferences of the growing constituency of the middle class. This would only mean a return towards the pre-welfare state constellation of left–right political cultures along the lines of economic status (the traditional capital–labour vector).

However, despite assertions of the growth of the middle class resulting from the overall increase of wealth in western societies, numerous studies indicate that social groups have benefited from the economic growth of the nineties unequally and the rift between rich and poor has deepened.<sup>20</sup> Skills-based technological change of the last decade has produced a shift in demands in favour of highly skilled labour, especially in industries producing or making extensive use of information and communication technology, while it has worsened the employment and earnings prospects of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, especially in the manufacturing sector. Thus, mobility, the most progressive aspect of globalization, has proved to create significant downsides in terms of risks, and to distribute these risks unevenly. It has deepened the rift between two categories of people: skilled workers who can benefit from the opportunities of the globalized economy, and unskilled labour that is affected negatively by the rising risks. For instance, in the move of capital from western to eastern Europe (prompted by cheaper labour) and the consequent disinvestment in the North, the victims have been the least skilled workers, as they have been in the previous wave of the movement of capital from North to South.

Rather than increasing the middle-class constituency, the new economy deepens social differentiation. This new class differentiation along the lines of career prospects inherent in the new economy furnishes the two general constituencies of the opportunity–risk political alignment. Consequently, the socialist–conservative consensus on the welfare state is evolving into a consensus on the politics of opportunity (expressed by centre-left and centre-right, Third Way, parties) vs. the fear of risk, embraced by far-right and radical left formations.

The mobility of economic, social and occupational structures, the insecurity of the employment environment, the volatility of political preferences and voting behaviour are the particular forms in which the transformative process of the early twenty-first century finds its expression. In terms of *electoral mobilization* the transitional nature of the described social dynamic translates into two phenomena: first, the link between parties and electorates based on social class—a link which, arguably, has been eroding throughout the twentieth century—loses decisive relevance for electoral mobilization. Secondly, as a reaction to the weakening of the class-alignment link, the capacity of parties to address urgent

social concerns become the vital criterion in electoral mobilization, taking precedence over voters' ideological orientation or social background.

### **Politics after the Third Way**

The social differentiation, and the consequent split in political cultures along an opportunity–risk axis is being further fostered by the policy responses of Third Way governments (be it centre-left, as in Germany and Britain, or centre-right, as in France). The core of the Third Way policy turn consists in replacing redistribution-orientated with employment-orientated social policy. As a consequence, one of the most profound socio-economic developments of the past few years (since the second half of the nineties) has been the turn to labour market flexibility, a policy-trend largely and equally embraced by centre-left and centre-right governments in Europe.

However, labour-market activation strategies, combined with the circumstances of economic slowdown in the past two years, are deepening further the opportunity–risk schism dividing the two big electoral constituencies (skilled and unskilled labour) of the new political constellation. In this process the latter group increases faster, strengthening the grounds of the extreme-right/radical left poles, which are mobilizing their electorate along the risk lines of the new economy dilemma.

This by itself undermines the political credibility of the Third Way project (the opportunity pole of the new political constellation), and erodes its electoral basis. The negative social results of the Third Way policies have been growing: while indeed managing to counter unemployment, economic liberalization and growing labour-market flexibility have resulted in aggravating structural aspects of unemployment and poverty. Studies show that unemployment throughout Europe has increased in the last few years among young people and low-qualified workers. The negative trend towards segmentation in the workforce is rising steadily. Reintegration into the labour market has become more difficult, while social security coverage is becoming ever less adequate to growing job insecurity. It is likely that these negative outcomes of the reorientation of European policies towards market liberalization will persist and will start to be felt more acutely in the near future.

The new political reorientation along the lines of opportunities and risks, which was outlined in the preceding part of the study, is still evolving under the influence of the economic slowdown (in some cases, a downturn) that set in at the end of the nineties and led to the currently widespread economic weakness in Europe. The crisis of high-tech economies, a crisis which became socially significant at the beginning of the new century and has just started to find its political expression, indicates the emergence of a novel configuration between *new economy* and *old economy*, with respective changes in socio-economic structures, the organization of work, national and European employment and educational policies and, finally, the formation of ideological attachment and political preferences.

At the end of the nineties it seemed that the growing middle class of owners of small-scale businesses, who had enriched themselves during the stock-market boom and economic recovery of the late nineties, together with the group of white-collar workers which evolved into the class of highly skilled professionals,

would compose a stable social base for the centre-left and centre-right political parties, embracing the politics of opportunity within the Third Way paradigm. In the past economic conjuncture of growth, the newly enriched middle class was the group that disliked social spending and lent its support to Third Way policies, which stressed opportunity (policies which in the final account benefit large-scale capital). However, it is exactly the group of small and medium owners that is now facing competitive pressures and is likely to reconsider their belonging within the opportunity–risk dilemma. The current signs of gradual economic recovery are not significant enough to invalidate this prospect by tipping the social sensitivities of this group back towards the opportunity pole. With increasing risk factors in the current economic slowdown this groups turns into a group of volatile voters who would embrace the policy platform which proposes the most convincing minimization of risk while keeping opportunities available.

### Notes

1. The anti-globalization movements and the most recent mobilization of public opinion against military intervention in Iraq have been prominent in political discourse. Nevertheless, these mobilizations are not discrete political phenomena, but rather factors affecting policy-making and voting behaviour. Thus, anti-war protests in principle facilitate the mobilization of the left electorate. However, linking the war with security risks in Europe deepens already strong public sensitivity towards safety and order and thus helps mobilize support for the right.
2. Source of electoral data: European Parliament <<http://www.europarl.eu.int>>.
3. The great designer of Germany's post-war 'social-market economy' was Ludwig Erhard, a Christian Democrat.
4. For a good account of the discrepancies between successful economic policy and civic unrest see J. Eijvoogel, 'Behind the dikes there is bitterness amongst the tulips', *NRC Handelsblad*, 6 July 2002.
5. Unfortunately there are neither uniform future election data nor uniform voter-preference data on the social and psychological bonds between voters and parties in Europe. Also missing are uniform surveys in Europe on confidence in politicians, but the trend is often reported in single country analyses.
6. David Arter, 'The Finnish Election of 21 March 1999: Towards a Distinctive Model of Government?', *West European Politics*, Vol. 23, 2000, p. 185.
7. In fact Sinn Fein defies left–right classification.
8. Jean Laponce, *Left and Right—a Topography of Political Perceptions*, University of Toronto Press, 1981.
9. We stress here popular perceptions of the salience of certain phenomena, which is different from the real magnitude of the social issues in question. The object of this study is not to judge the correlation between actual developments of such phenomena as urban violence and immigration. This pertains to another study.
10. The perception of the growing salience of immigration is not necessarily a consequence of immigration growth. The ghettoization, rather than the volume of the immigration is at the route of the growing societal concern.
11. Marlise Simons, 'Dutch parties neck-and-neck in exit poll on elections', *International Herald Tribune*, 23 January 2003, p. 1.
12. According to the International Monetary Fund the war in Iraq is likely to cut the pace of global economic growth in half: to 1.5 per cent from 3 per cent in 2002, *International Herald Tribune*, 18 February, 2003, p. 10.
13. See, for instance, P. Perrineau, 'L'affaiblissement de l'antagonisme gauche/droite', *La V-ème République, permanence et mutations, Cahiers Français*, Vol. 300, 2002, pp. 48–54.
14. Mark Donovan, 'A New Republic in Italy? The May 2001 Election', *West European Politics*, Vol. 24, 2001, p. 205.

15. RPR: Rally for the Republic (Conservative, Neo-Gaullist); UDF: Union for French Democracy (Conservative).
16. The (quasi) novel rhetoric of opportunities and risks has been noted, in varied terms, by a number of analysts, and it is usually attributed to globalization. However, no connection has been made to political realignment, fostered not so much by globalization, but by the dynamics of the 'new economy' (globalization focuses on the scale, rather than the quantitative changes of the new economy).
17. The described realignment is less salient in the south of Europe, which has been marked by stability of the socialist governments (Portugal, Greece) and a numerically strong left vote (Italy). Politics in these countries are still marked by what the Portuguese prime minister Guterres called 'structural backwardness', which despite all the progress made during the last decade divides these countries from most of their European counterparts. Here issues of structural development are still the fault-line of the left-right divide between the pole of free enterprise and redistribution.
18. Arnaud Miguet, 'Election Report. The French Elections of 2002: After the Earthquake, the Deluge', *West European Politics*, Vol. 25, 2002, p. 209. There are unfortunately not uniform studies of the nature of voter constituencies throughout Europe.
19. When the left-right constellation first appeared in the late eighteenth century, economic and political liberalism stood to the left, as against adherence to tradition, which formed the ideological core of the right.
20. *People in Europe*: EUROSTAT report, March 2003.

### Commentary to enclosed graphs

The data were last updated on 10 March 2003. Sources:

- European Elections: *European Parliament* <<http://www.europarl.eu.int>>.  
Austria: *Bundesministerium des Inneren* <<http://www.bmi.gv.at/wahlen>>.  
Belgium: *Official website* <<http://verkiezingen2003.belgium.be>>.  
Britain: *Electoral Commission* <<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk>>.  
Danemarck: *Politiken* <<http://www.politiken.dk>>.  
Finland: *Tilastokeskus* <<http://www.stat.fi/tk/he/vaalit>>.  
France: *Ministère de l'Intérieur* <<http://www.interieur.gouv.fr>>.  
Germany: *Bundeswahlleiter* <<http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de>>.  
Greece: *Ministry of Interior* <<http://www.ypes.gr/ekloges/content/EN/default.htm>>.  
Italy: *Ministero dell'Interno* <[http://cedweb.mininterno.it/ind\\_elez.htm](http://cedweb.mininterno.it/ind_elez.htm)>.  
Ireland: *Irish Times* <<http://www.ireland.com>>.  
Luxembourg: *Centre Informatique de l'Etat* <<http://www.elections-99.lu>>.  
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Portugal: *Comissão nacional Eleições* <<http://www.cne.pt>>.  
Spain: *Congreso de los Diputados* <<http://www.congreso.es>>.  
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