

Mainstream vs challenger parties: concepts, trends, and prospects

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SUMMARY

- 1) Literature review and methodology: an **elusive mainstream**
- 2) Empirical analysis: a **substantial but not (yet) catastrophic erosion of the mainstream** in Western Europe (EU15, 1989-2016)
- 3) Discussion

1. AN ELUSIVE MAINSTREAM

Notion of **political mainstream** commonsensical, but no in-depth discussion exists

Growing attention to the '**crisis of the mainstream**' and the '**rise of challenger parties**' in the literature

- Hernández & Kriesi (2015), Hobolt & Tilley (2016), etc.

Goal of this paper:

- review the **literature** on the topic
- define **clear and measurable indicators** of the mainstream
- measure the **evolution of a historically defined mainstream** (status quo in 1989) in Western Europe (EU15, 1989-2016)

Literature can be divided in **five groups**, with classifications based on:

- (1) ideology
- (2) novelty
- (3) proximity to power
- (4) anti-establishment appeal
- (5) mixed criteria

TABLE 1. CLASSIFICATIONS OF MAINSTREAM AND NON-MAINSTREAM PARTIES

CLASSIFICATION CRITERION	AUTHOR	OPERATIONALISATION	CATEGORIES
1. Ideology	Adams et al. (2006)	left-right extremeness (party family membership)	mainstream, niche
	Meyer & Miller (2015)	diversity (niceness of issue salience)	mainstream, niche
2. Novelty	Emanuale & Chiaramonte (2016)	start-up organisations or rising minor parties	old, new
3. Proximity to power	Hobolt & Tilley (2016)	governmental participation	mainstream, challenger
4. Anti-establishment appeal	Capoccia (2002)	ideological and relational anti-systemness	pro-system, anti-system
	Abedi (2002)	self-perception and issues	establishment, anti-political establishment, other
	Akkerman et al. (2014)	ideas	elitist, pluralist, populist (attitudes)
5. Mixed	Hernández & Kriesi (2015)	ideology, novelty, proximity to power	mainstream, non-mainstream, radical left, radical right, new

Several **problems**:

- no in-depth theoretical or historical discussion of categories
- heterogeneity of criteria
- operationalisation problems (vagueness, uncertainty)
- nature or perceptions?
- dynamic or static definitions?
- few empirical surveys

Methodology

- first chamber legislative elections, 15 Western European countries, 1989-2016
- aggregate rolling figures (end-of-year)
- no threshold of relevance (minor parties and candidates included)
- restrictive rules on party succession (only main successor)
- criteria based on the literature, but streamlined and adjusted (clear, objective definitions)
- static definition (standpoint: status quo in 1989)

Result: **five separate indicators** of mainstreamness

TABLE 2. INDICATORS OF MAINSTREAM STRENGTH

INDICATOR	MEASURE
1. All parties	Share of votes of all parties and candidates (on registered voters)
2. Old parties	Share of votes of parties with at least 1 first chamber seat in 1989 (on registered voters or valid votes)
3. Governmental parties	Share of votes of parties with at least 1 cabinet seat in 1970-89 (on registered voters or valid votes)
4. Centrist parties	Share of votes of parties belonging to the socialist, liberal, Christian democratic, or conservative party family (on registered voters or valid votes)
5. Mainstream parties	Share of votes of parties combining the four above-mentioned criteria (on registered voters or valid votes)

Caution 1: ‘challengers’ of the mainstream are extremely heterogeneous

- various kinds of abstentionists
- new parties, minority splits, minor old parties
- non-governmental parties with or without parliamentary representation
- radical left, radical right, green, “other” and unclassified parties

Caution 2: evolution of a historically defined mainstream

- does not capture the dynamic evolution of parties from non-mainstream to mainstream and vice versa (e.g. mainstream replacement in Italy in 1994)

Caution 3: does not capture some additional dimensions of non-mainstreamness

- Euroscepticism / populism / separatism / ...

2. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

All indicators point to a **substantial but not (yet) catastrophic erosion** of the traditional mainstream from 1989 to 2016

- all parties and candidates: 77.1% to 66.9% of registered voters (-10.1 points)
- parliamentary parties: 97.4% to 72.1% of valid votes (-25.3 points)
- governmental parties: 78.8% to 58.8% of valid votes (-20.0 points)
- centrist parties: 82.8% to 70.9% of valid votes (-11.9 points)
- mainstream parties: **75.9% to 53.7% of valid votes (-22.2 points)**

Temporally and geographically **uneven**

- initial drop (1989-94), almost stability (1995-2008), strong decline (2009-16)
- strong decline in ITA, GRC, IRL, NLD, AUT, almost no decline in LUX

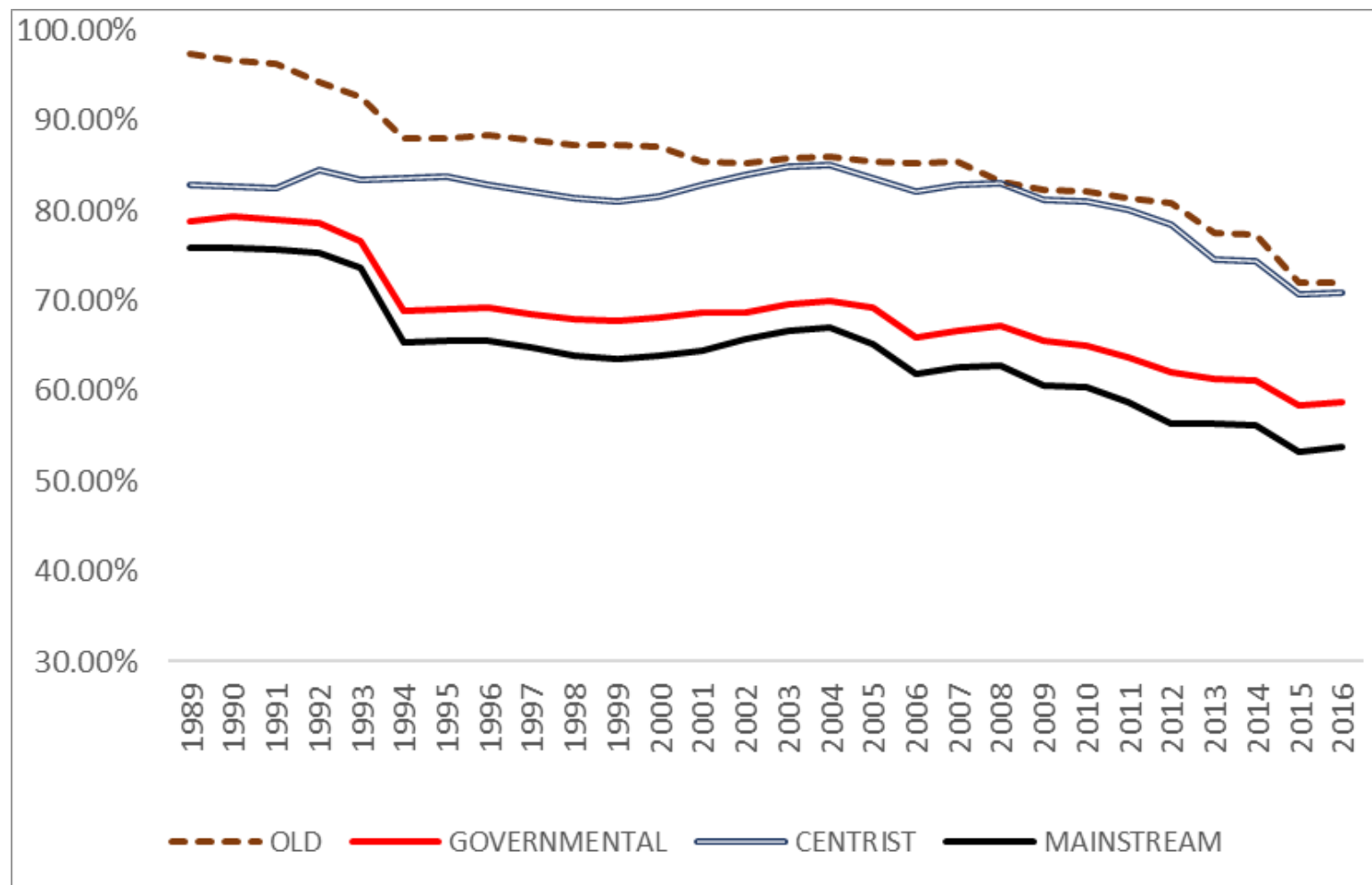
Radical renewals of party systems still rare

- Italy (1992-6), Greece (2009-15)

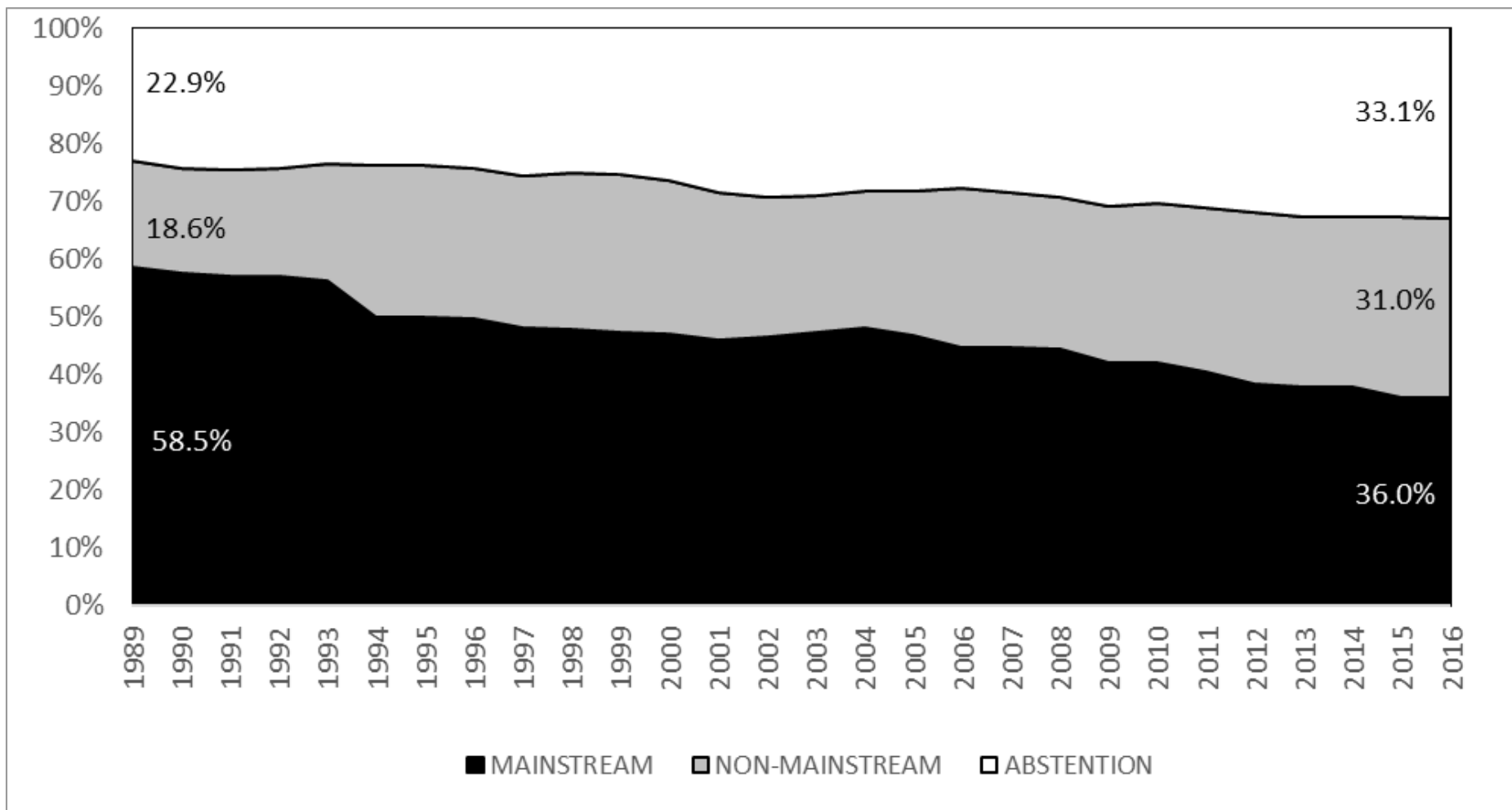
Traditional mainstream parties usually still able to **hold on to power**, but:

- increasingly through non-mainstream support or grand coalitions
- tipping point is often not far

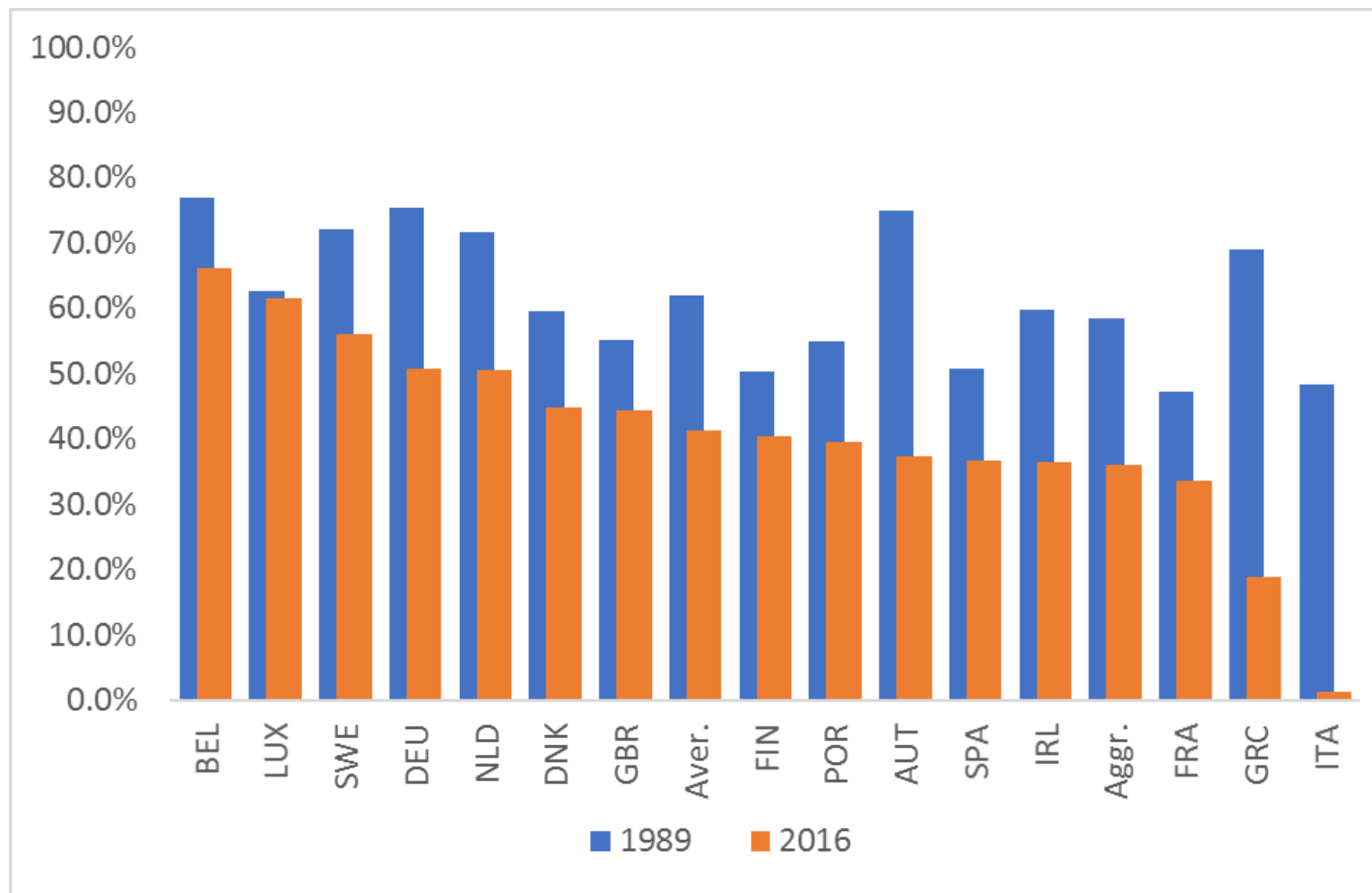
FOUR INDICATORS, EU15 (% OF VALID VOTES)



MAINSTREAM INDICATOR, EU15 (% OF REGISTERED VOTERS)



MAINSTREAM INDICATOR, 15 COUNTRIES (% OF REGISTERED VOTES)



3. DISCUSSION

Evidence confirms a certain “**bias toward stability**” of European party systems...

...but decade of economic crisis has been accompanied by a general **erosion of the traditional mainstream** and more frequent **critical elections**

No simple explanation

- results non-linear and very much dependent on **national political processes**
- role of **poor economic performance** (1991-93, 2008-16), but mostly when abrupt, and the reverse not true
- countervailing role of **left-right governmental alternation**, increasingly neutralised by grand coalitions

Implications

- mainstream erosion of the traditional mainstream **likely to continue** in the coming years
- however, this will **not necessarily lead to major policy shifts** (“extreme” parties still relatively weak and not necessarily radical and anti-system; EU and international constraints)

THANK YOU!

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Next book:

ALLEMAND, Frédéric and CHIOCCHETTI, Paolo (eds).
*Competitive solidarity. Developments and challenges of
the European socio-economic model.* In progress.



Latest book:

Chiocchetti, Paolo (2016). *The radical left party family
in Western Europe, 1989–2015.* Abingdon: Routledge.

