The Economist

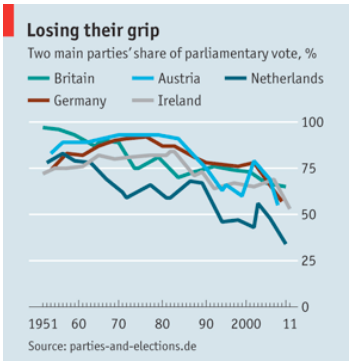
Europe's political parties

The shrinking big tents

Across western Europe, the leading parties are shedding votes

Apr 28th 2011 | from the print edition

A TUBBY, bespectacled man leads his Eurosceptic party into third place in a tight Finnish election. In a German state ruled by the Christian Democrats for 58 years, the Greens come top, led by a former teacher who will be the party's first state premier. In the Netherlands the success of an extravagantly coiffed populist has led mainstream parties to court him.



Across Europe, once-dominant political parties are seeing their support fragment (see chart). Some "natural" parties of government, such as Fianna Fail in Ireland and the Social Democrats in Sweden, are out in the cold after decades of hegemony. In Britain and Germany systems in which power alternated between centre-left and centre-right for generations have been upset by the strength of smaller parties. A new politics has emerged in which old allegiances have frayed, political identities have blurred and voters' trust in familiar parties has crumbled. One result is that voter turnout has fallen almost everywhere.

Recent elections have laid bare the established parties' woes, but the causes go back decades. One is the decline of institutions that linked individuals to parties—the church in countries with a tradition of Christian democracy, or trade unions that channelled funds (and votes) to left-wing parties. With pews empty and unions shrinking to a mostly public-sector rump, old parties are seeing their membership lists shrivel and their financing dry up.

Class allegiances and tribal ties have also lost their force. Britain's Conservative and Labour parties could once rely on millions of "votes for life". No longer. Voting has become more a matter of consumer choice than of ideological fealty. The cosy consensus that so often marked post-war politics is gone. "People are no longer spending 20 years in a party, a union or even a job," says Bruno Cautrès at Sciences Po university in Paris. "They don't like organisations to speak for them; they want to speak for themselves."

The rise of globalisation and the transfer of powers to Brussels have also made old parties less potent. In the decades after the war, when strong forces forged political consensus, economies were growing fast and demography seemed favourable, the big-tent parties could make a clear offer to voters: state health care, government-funded pensions. Today, when governments seem unable to stop factories shifting jobs to Asia or immigrants flooding in, voters find the big parties less appealing.

The fragmentation of the big parties makes forming governments harder. Now that Germany has five national parties instead of three, the country is likely to see more awkward coalitions, or grand coalitions in the Austrian style. The process of forming Dutch governments has become ever more elaborate. Belgium has had no government for over a year.

As the big parties flounder, a cadre of challengers is on the march. In some countries former fringe parties have joined the mainstream, often holding the balance of power. Britain's Liberal Democrats, whose predecessor party took just 3% of the vote in the 1950s, joined a Tory-led coalition after winning 23% last year. Germany's Greens, who are soaring in the polls, may join the federal government again after the next election. Regional parties are growing in such countries as Britain, Italy and Spain, sometimes joining or becoming key supports for national governments.

But the phenomenon that has grabbed most attention is the rise of populist parties often termed "far right". The label can be misleading. In the Netherlands Geert Wilders's attacks on Islam are partly about the religion's hostility towards the sexual and other freedoms the Dutch prize. Some Scandinavian upstarts frame their anti-immigrant stance as a defence of the welfare state. Many newcomers eat into the votes of left-wing as well as right-wing parties.

Yet they share a dislike of immigrants and the European Union. Their leaders, often charismatic, telegenic personalities, rail against the establishment both at home and in Brussels. Timo Soini's True Finns may enter government after winning votes by arguing against using the taxes of hard-working Finns to prop up the bust economies of lazy southern Europeans. Marine Le Pen has moved France's National Front away from anti-Semitism towards more resonant concerns, such as Muslims praying in the streets or the dangers of globalisation. Polls suggest she may reach the run-off in next year's presidential election, as her father did in 2002.

Not all new parties thrive. Yet several are changing national politics. In Denmark the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party has propped up a minority government for a decade, securing concessions on immigration in return. In France President Nicolas Sarkozy is wooing National Front supporters by making hardline noises on Islam and crime. Angela Merkel's recent U-turn on nuclear power in Germany was prompted in part by (justified) fears that her Christian Democrats risked losing more votes to the Greens.

This suggests that the mainstream parties are running out of coping strategies. "This is not going away," says André Krouwel at the Free University in Amsterdam. "The economic crisis, the Arab spring, immigration pressures on Europe—it is only going to get worse for the established parties." Wheezes such as slashing party-membership costs, tried by the French Socialists in 2006, or experiments in social-networking media are no match for the long-term political, economic and cultural forces weakening the big parties.

The next threat may be splits. "Without a strong ideology, there's little reason why big parties should hold together," says Peter Mair of the European University Institute in Florence. "If you're an ambitious politician, why not form your own grouping?" Mr Wilders belonged to the liberal VVD before breaking away in 2004. His success since will encourage others.

from the print edition | Europe