

## **Christian Democracy in France and Europe post-1945**

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### Keywords

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### **Q. How do you explain the emergence of Christian Democracy in post-1945 Western Europe?**

A. Catholic parties emerged in most European countries in the second half of the nineteenth century. The German Centre Party was founded in 1871 to protect Catholic interests in the Protestant-dominated, newly created German Reich. Many Catholics throughout Europe regarded it as a model of organizational cohesion and electoral mobilization against liberal, anticlerical and socialist programmes threatening the role of religion and the Church in society, for example, in education. In some European countries, Catholic parties only developed slowly. In France, for example, the political Right was highly fragmented for historical reasons, and the Republican programme of *laïcisme* was politically dominant in the Third Republic, eventually resulting in the secularist legislation of 1905. In Italy, Catholics initially observed the Vatican's interdiction on political activity in what the Pope regarded as an illegitimate Italian state after the annexation of the Papal State in 1870.

In inter-war Europe, most Catholic parties (like the French PDP, created in 1924) supported the democratic and/or Republican regimes. They were soon confronted with the totalitarian challenge from the political Right, however. The majority of the Italian PPI opposed Mussolini, but a minority sided with him, seeking a political role for themselves in the new fascist state. In Germany, the Centre Party participated in all Weimar Republic governments, but moved towards the Right during the second half of the 1920s. In 1933, its parliamentary party (despite some internal opposition) voted for Hitler's *Ermächtigungsgesetz*. In Belgium, the electorally highly successful Catholic Party was confronted in the 1930s with a challenge from right-wing Flemish nationalists. Even where the party elites remained committed to democracy, many Catholic voters were attracted by authoritarian corporatist and fascist movements and societal models such as those of Portugal and Spain.

The Second World War created ideal political conditions for the success of Christian Democracy in Western Europe, however. The Far Right was discredited by the fascist regimes and collaboration, as in Vichy France, for example. The democratic 'Left' inside Christian Democracy was strengthened by the search for a 'third way' between socialism and capitalism. Many Christian Democratic parties also had political leaders who were untainted by collaboration, like the first Italian and West German Prime Ministers De Gasperi and Adenauer, or who had actually played a leading role in the resistance like Georges Bidault, the leader of the French resistance in 1943–44 and long-standing Prime Minister and Foreign Minister during the Fourth Republic. Most importantly perhaps, the beginning of the Cold War favoured the Christian Democrats and their traditional resolute opposition to communism, especially in Italy and West Germany.

**Q. What was the nature of these Christian Democrat parties and how did they differ from country to country?**

A. Christian Democracy after 1945 retained some of its original aims such as the protection of Church interests and religious education. At the same time, it developed other political priorities, especially the creation of non-socialist welfare states and European integration. Importantly, these parties insisted on their distance from the Church, as in the case of the French MRP, or at least became much more independent of the Catholic Church, even when it continued to play an important role for electoral mobilization. Moreover, unlike in inter-war Europe, no Catholic priests were actively involved in Christian Democratic politics at a higher level after 1945.

Despite many similarities, however, the Christian Democratic parties differed significantly in terms of their internal organization, their relationship with other parties and their national political roles. Some parties, like the Belgian PSC/CVP and the Italian DC, were parties with a huge mass membership. Others, like the West German CDU/CSU, initially had a much smaller membership, without being nearly as well anchored in Catholic societal organizations as their predecessor, the Centre Party. Also, some parties saw themselves as centrist parties and were sometimes more inclined to form coalition governments with socialist parties, as in France and the Netherlands, than liberal or other 'right-wing' parties. In Italy and West Germany, however, where right-wing parties were initially small, following the experience of national socialism and fascism, the communist threat divided the electorate, and the DC and the CDU/CSU tried to cover almost the entire political ground from the centre-left to the democratic Right. Moreover, some parties had to operate in mixed confessional states where Catholicism was in a minority, i.e. the Netherlands, West Germany and Switzerland. In the Netherlands and Switzerland, the parties, continuing their pre-war tradition, initially remained Catholic parties, while the West German CDU/CSU tried to become more truly inter-confessional, compared to the earlier Centre Party.

**Q. Who supported these parties?**

A. Despite the new non-confessional or inter-confessional rhetoric of the Christian Democratic parties after 1945, the vast majority of their members and voters were initially practising Catholics. In 1946, for example, 75 per cent of practising Catholics in France supported the MRP in the first elections for the *Assemblée nationale*. In the Netherlands, the confessional Catholic KVP even managed initially to gain the votes of 90 per cent of all Catholics who still saw in the party a guarantee for equality in a Protestant-dominated country. The formally inter-confessional CDU/CSU in fact received a very disproportionate vote from Catholics compared to Protestants, a situation which only began to change in the 1960s, not least as a result of efforts by Adenauer and the party leadership to bring more Protestants (like Ludwig Erhard and Gerhard Schröder) into leading positions into the party and the government.

In societal terms, the Catholic parties, representing a religious milieu, had traditionally been 'people's parties' in the sense that they were supported by voters from all social classes. Up to a point, the Christian Democrats managed to retain such inter-class support after 1945, although their leadership was generally much more middle class. In some countries and regions like Flanders, the Christian trade unions were strong and played a disproportionately influential role which usually resulted in

more 'left-wing' economic and social programmes and policies. Especially from the 1950s to the 1970s, however, working-class support for Christian Democrats suffered from the decline in religious influence, and many Catholic workers voted for other parties, especially the Socialist and Social Democratic parties. This is also one important reason for the particularly severe electoral crisis of those Christian Democratic parties (such as the Dutch KVP and the Belgian PSC/CVP) during the 1960s and 1970s which relied disproportionately on Catholic working-class support.

**Q. What were the links between these parties? How far can we talk about a pan-European movement with a common political programme?**

A. Although Catholic and Christian Democratic parties never had an 'internationalist' programme like the Socialists, they did have a tradition of transnational contacts going back to their common opposition to liberal, anticlerical and socialist programmes in the second half of the nineteenth century. Formalized party contacts only began in a very rudimentary form in 1925, however. After the Second World War, the Christian Democrats, who as a whole, were now dominant in (continental) West European politics, intensified their cooperation in the *Nouvelles Equipes Internationales*, a transnational body dedicated to facilitating European cooperation. Leading Christian Democrats like Konrad Adenauer and Bidault also met secretly from 1948 at a time when the Federal Republic of Germany did not exist and Franco-German contacts in particular were highly sensitive in France. The Christian Democrats later created the European People's Party (EPP) in 1976 which has since been expanded by the addition of several initially more conservative parties like the Spanish PP. The EPP is currently the largest parliamentary party in the European Parliament.

Up to a point, the transnational dimension of party cooperation has encouraged grass-roots contacts, for example, in border regions or through city links. On the whole, however, closer transnational cooperation has been largely limited to the party elites and the parties' 'European' specialists and functionaries. At the European level, the EPP is naturally more fragmented than its member parties, as 'Europe' adds another layer of national differences to the existing internal fragmentation of national Christian Democratic and conservative parties. Nevertheless, the EPP is a broadly centre-right movement which supports Atlantic cooperation, the mixed economy and controlled economic liberalization and modernization. Crucially, however, the Christian Democrats have traditionally been very united in their support for European integration and for a more or less federal Europe. Without them, the partly supranational integration in the European Coal and Steel Community, founded in 1951–52, and the European Economic Community, founded in 1957–58, would most likely never have come about, and Christian Democrats have been behind most initiatives for 'deepening' the current EU, as in the context of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Although there was substantial support for European integration among Socialists, as in the French SFIO, the Christian Democrats were much more easily reconciled to the kind of 'Europe' that emerged in the 1950s: a 'core Europe' from which the United Kingdom (without a tradition of political Catholicism or Christian Democracy) excluded itself, and one that was initially based on market integration, although with provisions for state intervention and economic and social harmonization, but not on national planning and nationalization, which is what many Socialists still preferred at the time. Indeed, 'Europe' almost became a kind of 'religion' for Christian Democrats in the 1950s, and they have tried to capitalize on

the leading role of the Christian Democratic ‘founding fathers’ – Schuman, Adenauer, De Gasperi, Bech and others ever since, especially in competition with Social Democratic parties.

**Q. How strong was the Christian Democrat movement in France between 1944 and 1958?**

A. After 1944, the MRP profited immensely from the Vichy experience and the discrediting of right-wing political ideologies. It presented itself as a new non-confessional political force which fully supported the Fourth Republic, being more open than the right-wing parties in inter-war France towards a greater role of the state in the economy, extensive social policies and political cooperation with the Socialists. Its initial strength, when it became the largest party in 1945, also had to do with the fact that de Gaulle, although not himself a member of the MRP, was a Catholic-influenced politician who was seen to support it, at least until the formation of his own, Gaullist party, in 1947. Many leading MRP politicians like Bidault initially had close links with de Gaulle. The MRP party leader, Maurice Schumann, had worked closely with him in exile and was well known in France through his radio broadcasts. Moreover, the MRP had impressive leaders untainted by collaboration, from Bidault to Schumann, Teitgen, de Menthon and Robert Schuman and slightly younger ‘Europeanists’ like Pflimlin and Poher, who was defeated by the Gaullist Pompidou in the 1969 election for the presidency after de Gaulle’s retirement from French politics.

Even more importantly, perhaps, many Vichy supporters regarded the MRP as a politically legitimate safe haven and a stronghold against Communism. In fact, the MRP was often attacked by the Left for being a party of Catholic Vichy supporters. It is certainly true that the party suffered from the beginning from a very pronounced dichotomy between a more ‘left-wing’ leadership and more ‘right-wing’ voters, many of whom opted for the new Gaullist party or the Liberals quite soon after 1945, so that the MRP had already lost half of its original electoral strength by 1951. In fact, it was the only ‘Christian Democratic’ party in Western Europe after 1945 which, for a number of reasons specific to the French experience, lost much of its new strength and influence so quickly after the war. It perhaps suffered its greatest political, but not electoral, defeat in 1954 when the French parliament finally rejected even debating the European Defence Community treaty for a European army which the MRP had originally initiated in the autumn of 1950.

**Q. What happened to the Christian Democrat movement in France under the Fifth Republic?**

A. As the last Prime Minister of the Fourth Republic, Pflimlin – supported by the vast majority of the party leadership – eventually supported the return of de Gaulle to power in 1958 to avoid a military insurrection over the war in Algeria. The MRP, which was at that time reduced to some 8 per cent of the vote, initially played a minor role in the Debré governments of 1958–62. When Pflimlin and Schumann re-entered the new Pompidou government in April 1962, they resigned only one month later together with three other MRP ministers over de Gaulle’s opposition to supranational European integration – a core element in the political belief system of leading MRP politicians – in a famous press conference in May 1962. The MRP lost many seats in national elections in November 1962 which massively strengthened the Gaullists. After this experience, the new MRP leader Lecanuet sought new ways of reorganizing

the centre of French politics, including the Radicals and Independents, with the MRP finally being formally dissolved in 1967. Since then, French 'Christian Democracy' has formed an important part of varying centrist political formations, especially of the UDF, originally created by Giscard d'Estaing. It has retained a disproportionate electoral strength in strongly Catholic regions like Brittany and Alsace-Lorraine. Arguably, its main programmatic contributions have been the development and reform of the welfare state informed by Catholic social teaching and, particularly, its resolute defence of (supranational) European integration in an often hostile political environment, especially in relation to the Gaullists.

### **Key publications by Wolfram Kaiser**

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### **Further reading**

Robert Gildea, *France since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The Fourth Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

### **Acronyms.**

CDU/CSU - Christian Democratic Union / Christian Social Union (postwar Germany)

DC - Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy; postwar Italy)

EPP - European People's Party (created 1976)

MRP - Mouvement Républicain Populaire (postwar France)

PDP - Parti Démocrate Populaire (interwar France)

PP - Partido Popular (Popular Party / Spain)

PPI - Partito Popolare Italiano (Italian Popular Party)

PSC/CVP - Parti Social Chrétien (Wallonie) / Christelijke Volkspartij (Flanders)

