

Article

Understanding Civilizational Populism in Europe and North America: The United States, France, and Poland

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Abstract: This article tests the salience of the concept of “civilizational populism” in the European and North American contexts. Right-wing populism is increasingly successful across a range of countries in Europe and North America. While right-wing populism is oriented toward nationalism and nativism, many right-wing populist parties increasingly perceive, as Brubaker puts it, the “opposition between self and other” and “the boundaries of belonging” not in narrow “national but in broader civilizational terms”. Yilmaz and Morieson describe this phenomenon as “civilizational populism”. Using Cas Mudde’s ideological/ideational definition of populism, Yilmaz and Morieson describe civilizational populism as “a group of ideas that together considers that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people, and society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations that are hostile and present a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the pure people”. Civilizational populism appears to be widespread across Europe, and it is also present in the United States, although there is curiously little research on this phenomenon, and Yilmaz and Morieson’s conception of civilizational populism has not been extensively tested. To test the salience of this concept, this article examines three distinct manifestations of civilizational rhetoric in three different countries: the Trump administration in the United States, National Rally in France, and PiS in Poland. The article asks the following two questions. What role does civilizationalism play in populist discourses? How do the civilizational populists in France, Poland, and the United States define “the people”, “elites”, and “others”, and what are the similarities and differences between the parties/movements examined? The article finds that all three parties/movements may be termed “civilizational populists” under the definition given by Yilmaz and Morieson. It finds that the civilizational populists examined in the article posit that “elites” are immoral insofar as they have both turned away from the “good” religion-derived cultural values of “the people” and permitted or desired the immigration of people who do not share the culture and values as “the people”, instead belonging to a foreign civilization—Islam—with different and even antithetical values. However, the article finds that “the people”, “elites”, and “others” are described by Trump, Le Pen, and Kaczyński in significantly different ways.

Keywords: populism; religion; Poland; United States; civilizationism



Citation: Morieson, Nicholas. 2023. Understanding Civilizational Populism in Europe and North America: The United States, France, and Poland. *Religions* 14: 154. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020154>

Academic Editors: Ihsan Yilmaz and Julie Mell

Received: 16 December 2022

Revised: 11 January 2023

Accepted: 19 January 2023

Published: 28 January 2023



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1. Introduction

No longer a fringe political movement, right-wing populists have formed governments or taken part in ruling coalitions in the past decade alone in Hungary, the Netherlands, the United States, Poland, and Czechia, and they present a formidable political force in France, Sweden, Finland, Germany, and Belgium (Zulianello and Larsen 2021). While right-wing populism across the Western world is oriented toward nationalism and nativism, it is interesting to observe that many right-wing populist parties increasingly perceive the “opposition between self and other not in narrowly national but in broader civilizational terms” (Brubaker 2017a, p. 1193). This type of populism has been termed “civilizational populism”. According to Yilmaz and Morieson (2022), who work within Cas Mudde’s

(2004) ideological/ideational definition of populism, civilizational populism is “a group of ideas that together considers that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people, and society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations that are hostile and present a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the pure people”. Populists of all kinds perceive social, political, and economic elites as a corrupt and immoral (Mudde 2017) class of people who rule illegitimately over a morally pure and authentic “people”. Therefore, Yilmaz and Morieson (2022) argue that civilizational populists divide society into “the people”, who are morally good insofar as they belong to the superior civilization; “elites”, who are immoral insofar as they have abandoned the core values of the superior civilization; and “others”, who belong to inferior foreign civilizations.

The phenomenon of populist politicians using concepts such as religion or culture to construct ingroups and outgroups is, of course, not new (Zúquete 2017; Yilmaz et al. 2021). For example, in the American political context, populist Huey Long portrayed himself as an almost messianic religious figure. During the 1930s Depression, a “time of fear and uncertainty, Long cast himself as a charismatic” religious figure and associated himself and his political cause with “the metaphysical, the transcendent” (Hogan and Williams 2004, p. 163). Long appears to have successfully cultivated a close relationship between himself and his supporters—as if he were a preacher and they his “flock”. Hogan and Williams (2004, p. 162) show that Long claimed his anti-elite “Share our Wealth” plan to be “approved by the law of our Divine Maker” and “prescribed by the Bible”, and that he understood Leviticus and the Book of James to demand that Christians ensure wealth was “scattered among the people” (Hogan and Williams 2004, p. 162). Long also used emotional religious language, almost as if he were a preacher, in his public speeches (Hogan and Williams 2004, p. 150). Following his death, Long’s supporters in Louisiana were reported to be venerating him well into the 1970s, with many placing a photo of the “Kingfish”, as he was known, on their walls next to an image of Jesus Christ (The New York Times 1975). In Europe, French populist and longtime leader of the National Front Jean-Marie Le Pen portrayed himself as a defender of France’s Catholic traditions and values, and he was critical of both Gaullist *laïcité* and successive French governments’ decisions to encourage Muslims to immigrate to France (Roy 2016; Davies 1999).

Civilizationism is also not a new concept in contemporary politics. Samuel P. Huntington’s (1993, 1996) argument that post-Cold War politics would be defined by civilizational conflict, and that the peoples of the world could be divided into several civilizations, sometimes with a particular nation at the core of each civilization (e.g., the United States is the “core state” of Western civilization), was in certain respects prescient and/or proven to be a powerful influence over people’s perceptions of international politics. However, the combining of civilizationism, or the belief that the people of the world can be divided into several (sometimes incompatible) civilizations, and populism appears to be both a relatively new phenomenon and the product of several economic and political developments, including the rise of Islamist terror in the 1990s and 2000s, increasingly large-scale immigration from the non-West to the West resulting in rapid demographic change, the deindustrialization of much of Europe and North America, and the gradual dominance of “a new cultural politics” on the left, which “emerged around difference and identity” and either became co-opted by neoliberal capitalism or thrived within the neoliberal environment (Robertson and Nestore 2022). It is in this particular environment the civilizationism was combined with right-wing populism, as right-wing populists who had previously associated themselves with ethnonationalism and neo-fascism began to position themselves as defenders of Judeo-Christianity and Western civilization. They further began to posit that they were protecting “the people” from a loose alliance of “elites”, left-wing progressives, and Muslims, who they claimed were bent on destroying not merely national sovereignty, but also Western civilization itself and its Christian or Judeo-Christian derived culture and values. Right-wing populist movements thus incorporated civilizationism, not only in the

Huntingtonian sense of a clash between Islam and the West, but also as a conflict within Western civilization between “the people” and traitorous “elites” who had turned away from Western Judeo-Christian values. Equally, the right-wing populist movement sought to win support from people who felt alienated by economic, cultural, and demographic changes, and who felt their entire way of life was being attacked by the people running their nations.

Civilizational populism appears present across Europe and the United States, although there is curiously little research on this phenomenon, and Yilmaz and Morieson’s conception of civilizational populism has not been extensively tested. The work of [Brubaker \(2017a\)](#), [Kaya \(2021\)](#), and [Kaya and Tecmen \(2019\)](#), which describes populism in Europe as frequently civilizational and attempts to delineate its key elements and causes, and [Haynes \(2020b\)](#), which discusses “Christian civilizationalism” in populist and non-populist politics in the United States and Europe, are rare examples of social scientists describing this common yet surprisingly rarely studied phenomenon. The term “civilization” first requires some explanation. As Huntington has pointed out ([Huntington 1996](#), pp. 40–41), civilization need not only refer to a particular cultural bloc (or “civilization in the plural”, as it can also be used to describe the boundary between the barbaric and the civilized (or “civilization in the singular”). This second sense of civilization is used by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when he describes Israel as “the protective wall of western civilization” ([EFE 2016](#)) and Western civilization (including Israel) as facing “a constant battle between the forces of modernity and the forces of medievalism” in which the West and Israel are portrayed as modern and the Arab world and Iran as medieval and uncivilized ([Netanyahu 2022](#)). In the discourse of right-wing populism in Europe and the United States, Islam is sometimes described as non-civilized. For example, Geert Wilders has described the religion’s founder as “barbaric”, and Islam itself as “evil”, “barbaric and violent by nature”, “totalitarian”, inherently non-democratic, and therefore, incompatible with the modern, civilized West ([SBS 2010](#); [Wilders 2017](#)). Most right-wing populists are not as explicit in their categorization of Islam as barbaric, and they are more likely to imply that Islam is simply incompatible with Judeo-Christian-based Western culture, although implicit in this notion may be the idea that Muslims and Islam are uncivilized. It may be that right-wing populists in Europe and North America more frequently blend the two notions of civilization identified by Huntington, not merely using the term to describe the discrete boundaries between the civilizations of the Judeo-Christian West and Islam, but at the same time portraying Muslims as barbarous peoples bent on invading and destroying the West.

In 2017, sociologist Rogers Brubaker observed an emerging civilizational discourse among right-wing populist in parts of Europe. According to [Brubaker \(2017a\)](#), p. 1193), it is possible to identify and group together a number of right-wing populist parties in North-Western Europe insofar as within their discourses “the boundaries of belonging and the semantics of self and other are reconceptualized in civilizational terms” ([Brubaker 2017a](#), p. 1193). The catalyst behind this civilizational turn, [Brubaker \(2017a\)](#) argues, is the increasing presence of Muslims in Europe and the perception among some Europeans that there is a civilizational threat posed by Islam. Beyond Northern Europe, civilizational rhetoric has entered—most often via right-wing populist parties—mainstream political discourse in a variety of Western nations, including the United States, Italy, and Hungary ([Haynes 2020b](#)). For example, [Kaya and Tecmen \(2019\)](#), p. 49) show how the party manifestos of five right-wing populist parties, “Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, National Front (FN) in France, Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, and Golden Dawn (GD) in Greece), employ fear of Islam as a political instrument to mobilize their supporters and to mainstream themselves”. They find that “right-wing populist party leaderships across Europe seem to be strongly capitalizing on civilizational matters by singling out Islam” and drawing upon notions of European heritage and Judeo-Christian civilization being endangered by the rise of Islam in Europe ([Kaya and Tecmen 2019](#), p. 61). The political success of these parties indicates that a

significant portion of each respective voting public is concerned that their national culture and identity are threatened by immigrants from a foreign civilization. It also suggests that there is something potent in the combining of populism and civilizationalism, especially when civilizations are identified according to a religion-based classification scheme (e.g., as Judeo-Christian or Islamic).

This article examines the discourses of right-wing populist parties and movements in Europe and North America that claim to be defenders of Western or (Judeo-)Christian civilization and tests the salience of the concept of “civilizational populism” in the European and North American contexts. As it is not possible to discuss every nation in which civilizational populism is present, the article focuses on three manifestations of civilizational rhetoric in three different countries: the Trump administration in the United States, National Rally in France, and PiS in Poland. These parties/movements are chosen, first, because they are examples of politically successful populist movements. Donald Trump was elected president of the United States in 2016, an event that appears to have fundamentally changed the Republican Party and center-right politics in the United States in a variety of ways. The French National Rally has not achieved the same level of electoral success, and it has consistently failed to draw enough support to have its candidate, Marine Le Pen, elected French president. However, National Rally—despite its electoral failure—has contributed to the country’s drift toward right-wing politics and populism. Poland’s PiS, on the other hand, won the parliamentary elections in 2015 and established itself as the nation’s most widely supported and powerful political party, winning the subsequent 2019 parliamentary elections. Second, these three parties/movements are based in three different geographic locations and political and religious contexts. The United States is a populous, multicultural nation in which 40% of the adult population identifies as a Protestant Christian, but which is growing increasingly secular ([The Guardian 2021](#)). France and Poland, while both majority Catholic nations, differ in terms of their religiosity, with France being largely secularized and Poland’s people being more inclined toward Christian belief and practice, with over 86% of the population identifying as Catholic ([US Department of State 2019](#)). The three parties/movements chosen, then, provide an opportunity to study populist use of civilizational rhetoric in three distinct contexts, and therefore, contribute to a wider understanding of the phenomena and its meaning.

This article asks the following two questions. What role does civilizationalism play in populist discourses? How do the civilizational populists in France, Poland, and the United States define “the people”, “elites”, and “others”, and what are the similarities and differences between the parties/movements examined? To answer these questions, the article is split into four sections. The first examines civilizational populism within the Trump movement, particularly within the discourse and policies of President Donald Trump. The second examines civilizational populism in France, particularly within the National Rally party and the discourse of its leader, Marine Le Pen. The third section examines civilizational populism in the context of Polish politics and within the discourse and policies of PiS and its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński. The final section compares and contrasts the three parties’/movements’ use of civilizational rhetoric and uses the data generated to answer the key questions.

2. Civilizational Populism in the USA: The Trump Administration

Civilizational rhetoric in the United States did not begin with Donald Trump, although his rhetoric when campaigning to be president in 2016 incorporated notions of America as a Judeo-Christian civilization at war with Islam. To understand the Trump movement and administration’s conception of America as a “Judeo-Christian” nation, and therefore, part of a Judeo-Christian civilization incorporating Europe, its settler societies, and also Israel, it is useful to first examine historical and more recent ideas of American civilization and its relationship with other world civilizations. Equally, it is important to consider the influence of Samuel P. Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations thesis on American politics and foreign policy, and the manner in which it may have encouraged the United States

to engage in military interventions in the Muslim majority world in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, al Qaeda terror attacks. Both notions played an important part in the Trump administration's discourse and domestic and foreign policies, albeit sometimes in strange and contradictory ways.

The United States has until recently remained an overwhelmingly European and Protestant society. Thus, while Americans long perceived themselves as belonging to an American culture separate from Europe, America remained a Protestant European-dominated nation in which most other identities were marginalized until the civil rights, immigration, and other legal reforms of the 1960s. Indeed, the "civil religion" of the United States, as Robert Bellah (1967) called it, meshes together American nationalism with Protestant Christianity. After the Second World War, an effort was made to include Catholics, Jewish immigrants, and Judaism within the American civil religion. Americans began to increasingly describe their civilization as "Judeo-Christian". This was in many ways a positive development aimed at overcoming Christian anti-Semitism. Over time, however, the inclusive spirit of this rhetoric was perhaps abused by politicians, who began to use it in order to exclude Muslims from American society and portray Islam as a threat to the Judeo-Christian character of American civilization. The demonization of Muslims was aided by the growing influence of Samuel Huntington in Washington during the 1990s and 2000s. Huntington's (1993, 1996) clash thesis, which claimed that international politics would become, post-Cold war, oriented around eight or nine civilizational blocs, was a powerful influence on the George W. Bush administration. Following the terror attacks on 11 September, 2001, and guided by Huntington's (1996) insistence that Islam was a hostile civilization with "bloody borders", American politicians and political commentators increasingly described Islamic fundamentalism and, at times, Islam itself as a threat to the United States. The al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington were often held to be evidence of a clash of civilizations occurring between the "free" West, and the forces of Islam, which had attacked the United States because they hated its freedoms (Haynes 2020a). Moreover, the "War on Terror", a misguided attempt to defeat "radical Islam" and democratize the Middle East, appears to have been heavily influenced by Huntington's clash thesis.

Civilizationalism, while entrenched in American foreign policy circles in the 2000s, was not yet weaponized by populists. The emergence of the populist movement known as the Tea Party signaled a new form of populism in the United States: a right-wing populism that brought together "libertarianism and fundamentalist religion" and ultimately "coalesced into the Tea Party's concept of American exceptionalism" (Montgomery 2012, pp. 180–81). Civilizationalism also played a role in Tea Party rhetoric. For example, several Tea Party activists spoke of the importance of preserving America's "Judeo-Christian values" (Braunstein 2021). Moreover, they often defined American culture in religio-cultural terms and as Judeo-Christian (Braunstein 2021), and they attributed America's economic and social problems to the nation's abandoning of Judeo-Christianity (Braunstein 2021). As the Tea Party declined in popularity in the 2010s, a new and vastly more successfully populist movement emerged that was centered on Donald Trump. The Trump movement largely abandoned the libertarian rhetoric of the Tea Party and replaced it with economic protectionism and a nativist defense of an imagined American heartland from nefarious "elites" (Young et al. 2019). However, Trump continued to characterize the United States as a Judeo-Christian society clashing with Islam, and thus retained the "clash of civilizations" rhetoric common to Tea Party activists (Haynes 2017). When campaigning to be president in 2016, Trump outlined a foreign policy significantly different from that of both his Democrat and Republican adversaries. Describing his guiding principle as "America First", Trump condemned the Iraq War as a failure, promised to return Americans stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan to the United States, and demanded European nations increase their military spending and take greater responsibility for European security. However, Trump also sought to identify the United States more closely with "Judeo-Christianity" than his predecessors. For example, as Jeffrey Haynes (2017) noted, when Trump was questioned in

an interview about whether he believed the United States was founded on Judeo-Christian values, he responded: “Yeah, I think it was. . . . when I look at football coaches being fired because they held a prayer on the field, like yesterday, I think it’s absolutely terrible, I think it’s a terrible thing. I see so many things happening that are so different from what our country used to be. So religion’s a very important part of me and it’s also, I think it’s a very important part of our country” (Haynes 2017).

Trump also claimed that Islam represented a threat to America and its Judeo-Christian culture, claiming “Islam hates us”. Moreover, Trump’s chief advisors during his presidential campaign, Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka, often took even stronger public positions on Islam and its alleged incompatibility with Judeo-Christian civilization. According to Gorka, who following Trump’s election victory became Deputy Assistant to the President of the United States, Islam is an “enemy ideology” at war with America. Gorka claimed that Islamist terrorism is motivated in essence by hatred of America’s Judeo-Christian traditions and that no more “nuanced” explanation for Islamist terror was required. Bannon claimed in 2014 that “the Judeo-Christian West” was in an existential conflict with Islam that, if lost, “will completely eradicate everything that we’ve been bequeathed over the last 2000, 2500 years” (Hirsh 2016). Beyond Gorka and Bannon, Mike Flynn, national security advisor to President Trump, once tweeted that “Fear of Muslims is RATIONAL”, characteristically making no distinction between violent radicals and ordinary Muslim people (Hirsh 2016).

Once elected president, and during an official visit to Poland in 2017, Trump praised the nation’s right-wing populist government, suggesting that their strong anti-immigration, anti-Islam policies served to protect “the West”. In a speech in Poland that further revealed the civilizationalism inherent in Trump’s conception of world politics, he claimed that “the fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive. Do we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it?” (Thrush and Hirschfeld Davis 2017). Historian Stephen Wertheim, writing shortly after this speech, described Trump’s “civilizational framework” as a continuation of Obama-era justifications for America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also as adding a new element in which America’s “forever wars” were framed as part of a policing of the “enemies of civilization” (Wertheim 2017).

Furthermore, Haynes (2017) describes Trump as repeating the orientalist tropes of Samuel P. Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations thesis in his rhetoric on the relationship between Islam and “Judeo-Christian” America. He argues that Trump did not follow the path of Bush and Obama, who stressed that the United States was at war with “terror” and not Islam. Instead, using reckless language, Haynes writes, Trump perpetuated the idea of a clash of civilizations between Islam and Judeo-Christianity, and failed to distinguish between ordinary Muslims and violent Islamist terrorists. Equally, Trump showed, at times, little interest in fighting a “clash of civilizations” as president, dismissing both Bannon and Gorka within weeks of each other in 2017. On the other hand, a number of the Trump administration’s decisions appear to be concrete manifestations of Trump’s belief that the United States is a Judeo-Christian power incompatible with Islamic civilization. For example, in Executive Order 13769, often derided as the “Muslim ban”, the Trump administration appears to draw on notions of America as a “Judeo-Christian” society threatened by an Islamic rival.

2.1. The “Muslim Ban”—Executive Order 13769

Following the mass murder of 49 people at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in June 2016, a crime committed by a Muslim man—Omar Mateen—who had sworn allegiance to Islamic State, then presidential candidate Donald Trump spoke at length about the danger posed to the United States by what he called “radical Islam” (Time 2016). Speaking at a rally, Trump said that the Obama administration was partly responsible for the atrocity insofar as it had permitted the immigration of “thousands upon thousands” of people from Muslim

majority nations to the United States (Time 2016). The United States, according to Trump, had a “dysfunctional immigration system” that was bringing vast numbers of people into the country who possessed “the same thought process” as the “savage killer” Omar Mateen (Time 2016). Trump had previously argued that Muslim refugees from war-torn nations in the Middle East threatened America. For example, in a tweet deleted by Twitter following his banning from the social media platform, Trump “used clearly existential tones by pronouncing that taking in refugees from Syria (who he assumed to be potential terrorists) would lead to ‘the destruction of civilization as we know it!’” (Hall 2021).

Although Trump claimed that America has many “great” Muslim communities, he also attacked Muslim Americans for not reporting “bad” people to authorities, and therefore, bringing death and destruction to the United States (Time 2016). Furthermore, portraying the nightclub shooting as part of a clash of civilizations, he claimed that many of the “radical” Islamic principles Mateen and other people like him hold are “incompatible with Western values and institutions” (Time 2016). Rather, Trump claimed that “radical Islam is anti-woman, anti-gay and anti-American”, and even “enslaves women”, and that he personally refused “to allow American to become a place where gay people, Christian people, Jewish people are targets of persecution”. If elected president, Trump said, he would stop immigration from Muslim countries and change America’s immigration policies in order that they reflect national self-interest (Time 2016). Using the language of heritage populism, Trump promised that this policy change would help save America from its social and economic problems and return the nation to its previous greatness (Time 2016).

Once elected president, in one of his first acts, Trump signed Executive Order 13769, often derided as the “Muslim ban”. The executive order appears to have been an effort to make concrete Trump’s promise to reform the immigration system to reduce the number of refugees the United States received on a yearly basis and suspend immigration from Muslim nations that produce terrorism. The order reduced America’s humanitarian refugee intake and banned entry to the United States by Iranian, Iraqi, Somalian, Sudanese, Syrian, and Yemeni passport holders (Executive Order 13769 2017). Curiously, the ban did not extend to citizens of American allies Pakistan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, nations that had previously exported terrorism and themselves experienced deadly terror attacks. The ban was not focused on people identified by authorities as dangerous, but instead encompassed entire nations of people. This choice to not distinguish between ordinary people and terrorists was a theme that ran through Trump’s campaign and early presidency. Even though Executive Order 13769 was not a Muslim ban insofar as it targeted only Muslim majority nations with governments unfriendly toward the United States, the policy treated Muslim people within those nations as if they were not individuals, but rather representatives of a hostile faith too dangerous to be permitted within the United States, whose adherents held views inherently incompatible with Western culture and values.

2.2. Judeo-Christianity in Trump’s Foreign Policy

The foreign policy of the Trump administration reflected, at times and in important ways, Trump and his closest advisors’ populism. Georg Löffmann (2022), for example, examines how Trump used a populist discourse that played on Americans’ feelings of insecurity to win political support. According to Löffmann (2022), Trump established a “security narrative of an antagonistic international environment, marked by great power rivalry and ideological confrontation with China ... (re)established an enmity-centric framing device to legitimate US foreign policy choices and the United States’ role in the world in the public realm likely to endure beyond the Trump presidency”. Trump, according to Löffmann (2022), reframed the American “national identity through a populist security imaginary” and in doing so “elevated internal ‘enemies of the people’ to an ontological status of equal, or even superior standing to that of external threats to national security”. By “portraying internal and external Others as equally existential threats endangering the ‘real’ United States”, Trump “informed both foreign policy choices and mobilised voters through an affective persuasion of audiences, actively dividing society for political gain”.

Furthermore, Trump's "populist appeals to resentment, fear, and anxiety constituted a shared affective space between Trump and his followers that provided a source of mutual ontological reassurance and the legitimization of America First measures from immigration restrictions to trade protectionism and a Jacksonian foreign policy" (Löfflmann 2022). For example, Löfflmann argues that "Trump's narrative and political response to the pandemic was meant to bolster the public image of the President as a 'winner', who protected the American people against a world of foreign enemies, strategic rivals, and geopolitical foes. The unprecedented scope and severity of the global COVID-19 pandemic that came to dominate international politics and media headlines in 2020 thus acted as a catalyst that exposed the discursive dynamic of Trump's populist security imaginary". Löfflmann (2022) suggests that Trump's blaming of China for the outbreak of the virus was part of a populist "narrative of existential crisis emanating from beyond the United States' borders" that sought to "mobilise Republican voters in the 2020 presidential campaign through the antagonistic core logic of populist geopolitics" (Löfflmann 2022).

While Löfflmann describes Trump's foreign policy discourse as nationalist, there is strong evidence that civilizationism, often in the form of Christian- or Judeo-Christian-based identity politics, also influenced the Trump administration's foreign policy. The notion that the United States is a "Judeo-Christian" power, which ought to advance Judeo-Christian values and protect Christians and Jews throughout the world, is evident in the Trump administration's foreign policy in two different ways. First, in its promotion of "Judeo-Christian values" in its approach to America's longstanding international religious freedom agenda, but also in its unusually strong support for Israel. To understand the key role played by Judeo-Christian identity and values in the Trump administration and its foreign policy, we must first comprehend the demographics of Trump's supporters. "In the 2016 presidential election, 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump", Marcia Pally (2020, p. 405) reports, meaning that his administration was reliant on their continuing support. To retain that support, the Trump administration sought to provide their evangelical supporters with the concrete policy action they desired on a number of issues, including America's foreign relations. Haynes, for example, has shown how the Trump administration's foreign policy was shaped by a Judeo-Christian understanding of religious freedom and the role of the United States in the international sphere. "Judeo-Christianity" in the field of international relations refers to a belief that the United States and its foreign policy represents the "fundamental values of Western society that are believed to come from both Judaism and Christianity" (Altshuler 2016). Hurd, for example, argues that whether or not the actual values of the United States reflect the influence of Judaism (via the Old Testament) and Christianity is relatively unimportant; what is important is that many American policymakers believe this to be true and will act in the international sphere as if it is (Hurd 2010). Religious freedom is a fundamental value of American culture, as enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution. Whether religious freedom is a Christian or Judaic value is debatable. Many Americans, however, categorize their culture as Judeo-Christian and believe that the core American Judeo-Christian belief that each human being has a "right" to choose their religion ought to be universal (Hurd 2010). It is not surprising, then, that the United States has long supported the concept of international religious freedom and the notion that all people have the God-given right to choose their religion or their way of expressing their religious beliefs. However, as Haynes points out, what was novel in the Trump administration's approach was its "privileging of Judeo-Christian values", which "replaced a more flexible Christocentric approach, which characterized the three prior administrations" (Haynes 2020a). "The Trump administration's approach", Haynes (2020a) writes, "was contoured by ideological commitment to a Judeo-Christian view". As a result of this commitment to defending Judeo-Christian values and pleasing evangelicals, the Trump administration strengthened America's commitment to spreading religious freedom, while refusing to fund foreign humanitarian and health agencies that provided abortions, and made a special effort to highlight abuses against Christian communities around the world (Haynes 2020a).

The Trump administration's support for Israel, including its recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital ([Schake 2017](#)), demonstrates the incorporation of the Jewish people within the administration's conception of American identity and values, as well as within Western civilization, and its exclusion of Islam from both. The United States has long proven itself a close ally of Israel, not merely by supporting Israel's right to exist and defend itself, but also by supplying the nation with weapons and other aid. While all American administrations since 1947 have maintained a close relationship between the two countries, prior to the Trump administration, the American government most often chose to present itself as a relatively unbiased broker of peace between Israel and the Palestinian territories, in addition to between Israel and the Arab-Muslim world. The Trump administration, however, presented itself as a supporter of Israel and sought to distance itself from the Palestinians. In a 2016 speech to the pro-Israel lobby group AIPAC, Trump promised that his administration would "move the American embassy to the eternal capital of the Jewish people, Jerusalem", and "send a clear signal that there is no daylight between America and our most reliable ally, the state of Israel" ([Begley 2016](#)). He further added that the "Palestinians must come to the table knowing that the bond between the United States and Israel is absolutely, totally unbreakable" ([Begley 2016](#)).

The notion that the United States and Israel are core states of Judeo-Christian civilization played a role, according to Israeli academic and archeologist Raphael Greenberg, in American foreign policy under the Trump administration. [Greenberg \(2021\)](#) begins by noting the increasingly frequent, in his view, use of the term "Judeo-Christian" by "the American right to highlight its support of right-wing activism in Israel and its opposition to 'secular liberals' and the Islamic Other". He finds an extreme example of this in the visit of Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State in the Trump administration from 2018 to 2021, to Israel in November 2020. [Greenberg \(2021\)](#) describes how Pompeo visited the "high-profile, settler-run antiquities site of 'the City of David' in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem, in and beneath the Palestinian neighborhood of Wadi Hilweh (Silwan), less than two hundred yards away from the Temple Mount and the Al-Aqsa mosque". The "City of David" is a site claimed by some Israeli archeologists and the settler-run Ir David Foundation (or Elad) to be the city or citadel of David. It is part of a large archeological park in Jerusalem that, according to Elad, is proof that Jewish people were the earliest inhabitants of the region, which therefore belongs to their descendants ([City of David 2022](#)). Pompeo's visit to the "City of David" was described by the Trump administration as being designed to highlight "the more than 3000 years of Jerusalem's heritage upon which the foundations of both the US and Israel rest" ([Kempinski 2020](#)). In this way, Greenberg observes, the visit offered "a clear demonstration of a religious-political ideology that continues to reverberate in Israel and Palestine, even after the end of the Trump years" ([Greenberg 2021](#)). According to [Greenberg \(2021\)](#), the American embassy installed a plaque in the City of David's evacuation tunnels shortly before Pompeo's visit, which reads "The spiritual bedrock of our values as a nation comes from Jerusalem. It is upon these ideals that the American Republic was founded, and the unbreakable bond between the United States and Israel was formed". Greenberg suggests that this is further evidence that "Pompeo and the Christian right" view "the elevation of Donald Trump to the presidency . . . as part of God's plan"" and that, "in the words of Mike Evans", a prolific author and evangelical advisor to President Trump, "Israel has received a gift from God in an evangelical Secretary of State, an evangelical Vice President and a President who is the most pro-Israel, pro-evangelical President in American history" ([Greenberg 2021](#)).

The Trump administration's pro-Israel foreign policy did not appear motivated by a desire for more support—electoral or financial—from Jewish Americans. Instead, it was perhaps the result of the strong support the Trump movement required—and received—from American evangelicals, many of whom subscribe to a type of Christian Zionism ([Durbin 2020](#)). Thus, for some of Trump's evangelical supporters, the existence of a Jewish state in Israel is a precondition for the End of Times, to which they look forward, and which they believe will lead to the second coming of Jesus Christ ([Durbin 2020](#)). Throughout his

candidacy and early presidency, Trump's civilizational rhetoric was focused on the threat posed by Islam to the Judeo-Christian West. However, following the "territorial defeat of ISIS and the relative decline of 'lone wolf' attacks in the West", and after the firing of some of the most vociferously anti-Muslim members of his administration (such as Bannon and Gorka), "Trump . . . changed the primary target of his crisis rhetoric from terrorists to immigrants" (Hall 2021, p. 58). Civilizationalism thus became less important to Trump during his presidency and as the War on Terror began to be perceived less as an existential conflict and more as a disastrous war of choice from which the United States ought to extricate itself.

Finally, and especially following Trump's electoral defeat in 2020, the Republican Party has sought closer relations with Hungarian right-wing populist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. This is significant insofar as Orbán is himself a civilizational populist who claims he is protecting Judeo-Christian-based Western civilization in Hungary by establishing a post-liberal, Christian democracy in the country. For example, in May 2022, the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC)—which is traditionally used by Republicans to promote themselves as future leaders of the party and to advance their particular agendas within the conservative movement—was held for the first time outside the United States and in Budapest, Hungary. Furthermore, in August 2022, Orbán was invited to speak at the CPAC in Dallas, Texas. In his speech, Orbán claimed that the Democratic Party and President Obama were "globalists" who were trying to destroy Hungary's "Christian and national values" (Website of the Hungarian Government 2022). At the same time, Orbán claimed that, like his American Republican allies, he was fighting "Brussels and Washington", which he called the enemies of Western civilization (Website of the Hungarian Government 2022). Orbán, for his part, has cultivated an image of Hungary as *the* destination for people who believe that right-wing populism is the answer to Western civilizations' existential problems. Hungarian institutions under the control of Fidesz have encouraged British and American social conservatives to travel to Hungary and take up positions as visiting scholars. For example, American conservative writers Rod Dreher, Sohrab Ahmari, Gladden Pappin, Tucker Carlson, and John O'Sullivan have all developed institutional ties with Hungary and Fidesz. Dreher and Pappin were visiting fellows at Hungary's Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), a private college for advanced studies, which is closely associated with Orbán and funded in part by his government (Kalan 2020; MCC Website 2021). Fox News host Tucker Carlson is also associated with the MCC and gave a speech at its conference "MCC Feszt" in 2021. This growing cooperation between Orbán and members of the Republican Party suggests a degree of transnational collaboration between civilizational populists in the two countries.

3. Civilizationalism in France: National Rally

By the end of the 2010s, the French electorate had largely abandoned the mainstream center-left and center-right parties that had governed France in the second half of the 20th century. As the Socialist Party and *Les Républicains* lost support throughout the 2010s, new parties grew in significance, including Emmanuel Macron's centrist and pro-European *En Marche!* and National Rally, a rebranded National Front led by Marine Le Pen. By the 2020s, far-left presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon had become the leading voice of the left, eclipsing the Socialist Party in popularity, while Marine Le Pen was facing a major political challenge from rival far-right populist Eric Zemmour, a television host and candidate for president in 2022. The results of the presidential elections of April 2022 demonstrate the increasing popularity of right-wing, anti-immigration candidates, and of the consistent failure of the center-left to find support from voters (Voce and Clarke 2022). For example, Socialist Party candidate Anne Hidalgo received a paltry 1.8%, fewer votes than the 4.8% won by Republicans leader Pécresse and far below the 22% who voted for Mélenchon, a result that illustrates the collapse of the old governing parties of France (Voce and Clarke 2022). On the other hand, more than 30% of the electorate voted for either Le Pen or Zemmour in the first round alone (Voce and Clarke 2022).

One consistent feature of the French center-right and right-wing parties is civilizationism (Onishi and Alami 2022). When campaigning to be president in 2022, the leaders of the three largest right-wing parties/movements in France portrayed themselves, to varying degrees and in different ways, as protectors of Western Christian or Judeo-Christian civilization. Le Pen, for example, argued that France's immigration policy and the power of economic elites threatens to destroy French civilization and orient it toward Islam (France24 2022). Zemmour, too, claimed that French elites are destroying Judeo-Christian civilization in France, and he presented himself as a hero who will prevent the destruction of French identity and culture at the hands of Muslims and globalists (Szocs 2021). Civilizationism is not confined to the far-right in France. *Les Républicains* candidate Valérie Pécresse portrayed herself as a strong defender of European civilization, which she claimed was threatened by outside forces (Twitter 2022). She furthermore promised to reduce immigration and prevent a "great replacement" of ethnic French with non-European immigrants (Caulcutt 2022). Macron himself has, albeit in an entirely different manner, claimed to be a defender of civilization—"European civilization" in his case (Staunton 2022). Macron's conception of European civilization is rather different from Le Pen's. According to Macron, European civilization is not defined by a single set of Judeo-Christian derived values or Christian identity, but is rather epitomized by the European Union and a tradition of openness, high artistry, and opposition to narrow nationalism and xenophobia (Staunton 2022). Yet, while European civilization is "universal", Macron gives it boundaries (Macron 2022). It is important to note that Macron speaks of European and not Western civilization, and therefore, does not include the United States or the broader Anglophone world within European civilization. Equally, as president, he also claimed that Africans, by which he meant sub-Saharan Africans, have a "civilizational" problem insofar as they are unable to develop their economies or reduce population growth (Anyangwe 2017).

Civilizationalism, or the notion that humanity can be divided into several civilizations doomed to clash, is present in the French political discourse across the right and center of the political spectrum. This presence betrays a deep ontological insecurity in France, generated perhaps by the demographic and cultural changes that have taken place during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and especially due to the growth of Islam within the country. Equally, the increasingly civilizational political discourse in France is perhaps a reaction to the difficulties French governments have faced in eliminating social inequities between certain immigrant groups—particularly Muslims and Africans—and ethnic European French.

Marine Le Pen emerged, after 2011, as the most successful politician of the French right. Her vocal opposition to what she calls the "twin totalitarianisms" of globalization and Islam (Al Jazeera 2017) has proven so potent that she has, since assuming the leadership of the National Front in 2011, maintained her position as the second most popular candidate for president among all voters for a decade. While she failed to win the presidency in April 2022, her popularity among working class voters (more of whom voted for Le Pen than Macron nationwide)—and the emergence of other right-wing personalities who also incorporate populism and civilizationism in their respective discourses—ensured that civilizationism and populism remain important elements within right-wing and centrist political discourse in France (Turak 2022). Indeed, France shows a similar pattern to many other Western nations, whereby working class voters are leaving center-left parties, which increasingly represent the post-materialist interests of the professional classes, and voting instead for populist parties (Piketty 2018). What role does civilizationism play, then, in Marine Le Pen's populist discourse? And how does she use it to generate support among the voting public?

3.1. The National Front

Marine Le Pen assumed the position of leader of the National Front in 2011, replacing her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen. Jean-Marie Le Pen founded the National Front—an outgrowth of earlier integralist and fascist movements—in the early 1970s, and his person-

ality, political style, and convictions dominated the party throughout his period as leader. Under Jean-Marie Le Pen's leadership, the National Front was a far-right, anti-Semitic, anti-immigration, and anti-EU populist party. He sought to construct an identity for France based on the Catholic identity, French nationalism, opposition to communism, opposition to immigration from North Africa and the Middle East, and socially conservative, Catholic-derived values (Roy 2016). Jean-Marie Le Pen opposed *laïcité*—France's strict separation of church and state—and sought instead to entrench the Catholic identity and conservative social mores within French public life. Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front held traditional Catholic Masses during its rallies (Peter Davies 1999, p. 29), and during the mid-1970s—the first period of mass non-European immigration to France—expressed vocal opposition to non-European, non-Christian immigration to France. While the National Front was originally a vehicle for Jean-Marie Le Pen's anti-communist, pro-Catholic politics, the advent of mass immigration gave the party a new *raison d'être*: opposition to immigration and the presence of people from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East in France (Roy 2016, pp. 82–83). Jean-Marie Le Pen grew in popularity during the 1970s and 1980s. While he received less than 1% of the vote in the 1974 presidential elections, in 1988 he won 14.4% of votes and established himself as a major figure in French politics (Marcus 1995).

The increasing global importance of religious identity, and growing taboos concerning explicit racism, had an important impact on the National Front during the 1990s and 2000s. Responding to these changes, Jean-Marie Le Pen began to speak more of the threat Muslims—rather than, for example “Maghrebins”—posed to France and its religious and civilizational identity (Betz 1994, p. 183). When running for president against Jacques Chirac in 2002, he claimed that Muslims possess values “different from those of the Judaeo-Christian world” (Primor 2002). Muslims, he claimed, were a “grave phenomenon” who posed an existential threat to the republic and who spat “at the President of the republic” and did not cheer but rather “booed when the national anthem was played at a soccer game” (Primor 2002). While Jean-Marie Le Pen achieved his best result in a presidential election in 2002, winning through to the second round of voting, he was easily defeated by Chirac, winning just 17% of votes in the final round. The National Front fell into decline after 2002, and having been defeated so comprehensively by Chirac, the now elderly Jean-Marie Le Pen no longer seemed a credible presidential candidate.

3.2. Marine Le Pen's Civilizational Populism

The party's electoral fortunes turned around following the elevation of Marine Le Pen to the position of party leader in 2011. Marine Le Pen sought to de-demonize the National Front. She condemned anti-Semitism and racism, endorsed *laïcité*, and sought to alter the party's conservative positions on abortion and other social issues and move the National Front toward the political center (Cannane 2017). This did not mean that the party would abandon its anti-immigration platform; instead, under Marine Le Pen's leadership, it sought to frame Muslim immigration as a threat to French and Judeo-Christian civilization. The Marine Le Pen-led National Front, with its more “moderate” positions on social issues and its secularism, framed Islam as a conservative religious force that threatened France's secular constitution and culture. Le Pen also framed Islam as a threat to Judeo-Christian values, among which she included *laïcité* or secular differentiation between church and state. Unlike her father, Marine Le Pen strongly defended the 1905 law separating religion and politics in the French public sphere, and she portrayed Muslims as a force that might undo this vital separation. She also, however, claimed that while Islam was incompatible with secularism, Judaism and Christianity were the progenitors of secularism and, together with the cultures of Rome and Greece, underpinned France's secular culture (Alduy 2014).

In 2007, the last presidential election contested by Jean-Marie Le Pen, the elder Le Pen won only 10% of the vote. In 2012, however, Marine Le Pen won 17.90% of all votes, a National Front candidate's best result. In 2017, Le Pen won through to the second round of voting, where she won 33% of all votes but was soundly defeated by the center-right

candidate for *Les Républicains*, Nicolas Sarkozy. Marine Le Pen's political discourse in 2017 incorporated civilizationalism in a somewhat vague manner. She described the coming elections as "a choice of civilization" and further claimed that France was engulfed in a crisis created by globalization and Islamic fundamentalism (Ganley 2017).

Le Pen elaborated on these themes in her campaign launch speech in Lyon on 5 February 2017. The speech was designed to portray Le Pen as a defender of the "immaterial capital" of the French and as an enemy of globalization and Islam: the "two totalitarisms" that she claims threaten French "civilization", "values", and "culture" (Morieson 2021, pp. 132–33). In her speech, Le Pen made a succinct case against globalization: "Globalization develops at two levels: from below with massive immigration and global social dumping; and from above with the financialization of the economy" (Morieson 2021, pp. 132–33). "Economic globalization", Le Pen claims, "has weakened the immune system of the nation by dispossessing it of its constituent elements: borders, national currency, the authority of its laws in conducting economic affairs, and thus allowing another world to be born and grow: Islamic fundamentalism" (Morieson 2021, pp. 132–33).

Globalization and Muslim immigration have created, Le Pen claims, a crisis in France that means it is no longer certain that French "children" will "live in a free, independent, democratic country". Encouraging her audience to be fearful of Muslim immigration, Le Pen claims that it by no means certain that their children will "live according to our cultural references, our values of civilization, our style of living" (Morieson 2021, pp. 132–33). Globalization, Le Pen argues, erases all cultural diversity "in order to facilitate the commercialization of standard products and to facilitate hyper profits at the cost of ecological depletion of the planet or child labor of the Third World". Le Pen "denounces" the triumph of finance over culture and the manner in which globalists' greed has permitted the "establishment of Islamic fundamentalism" in France (Morieson 2021, p. 133).

Portraying Islamic fundamentalism as a dangerous and monolithic civilizational enemy, which is inimical to everything France holds dear, Le Pen claims that the growing number of Muslims in France is the most deleterious product of globalization. "Islamic fundamentalism", she claims, using the "us vs. them" language typical of populism, "instrumentalizes the principle of religious freedom in an attempt to impose patterns of thought that are clearly the opposite of ours" (Morieson 2021, p. 133). Islam's "communitarian" conservative social mores, Le Pen claims, threaten to subjugate women and violate the key principles upon which France was founded. "These principles for which we are fighting", Le Pen claims, "are affirmed in our national motto 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', which itself proceeds from a secularization of principles stemming from our Christian heritage" (Le Pen, Marine 2016). In this final statement, Le Pen defines, in the vaguest manner possible, French civilization as Christian in nature, but also secular, and therefore, antithetical to Islam, which Le Pen claims to be "insoluble in secularism" (RF1 2011). Le Pen describes patriotism as "an act of love", and she describes globalists as people who do not love the French nation and its culture (Morieson 2021, p. 133). She tells all non-Christian citizens that they must accept that "no other laws and values" will be permitted "in France than those that are French" (Morieson 2021, p. 133).

Le Pen's populist rhetoric decrying a civilizational crisis in France appears to have played a role in increasing voter support for her bid to become French president. In the 2017 presidential elections, Le Pen won 21% of the vote in the first round, and although she was soundly defeated by centrist technocrat Emmanuel Macron in the second round, she won a party record 33.90% of votes. Throughout the complex and divisive period that followed, in which France, like other nations, was forced to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and a deteriorating economy, support for Le Pen and her party—now renamed "National Rally"—increased. At the same time, the traditional governing parties, the Socialist Party and *Les Républicains*, saw their voter base annihilated. Public anger toward "elites" left the old centrist parties hollowed out, and in their place, new and often populist movements enjoyed vastly increased support. President Emmanuel Macron and *En Marche!*, a party centered on Macron himself, increasingly occupied the pro-European

Union, liberal center of French politics, while the left and right became dominated by the rather extreme figures of Jean-Luc Melenchon and Marine Le Pen, respectively. At the same time, the emergence of Eric Zemmour seemed to, at first, challenge Le Pen's position as the figurehead of the French right. Zemmour, who is not a Christian but rather Jewish, claimed to be fighting for Christian values and civilization, and against the globalist class and the Muslim immigrants he charges with destroying France. Indeed, in an interview, he once mentioned that "French intellectual René Girard, writes in one of his last books, *Achever Clausewitz*, that today we are entering a spirit of the age where we are closer to Charles Martell and the Crusaders than to the French Revolution and the consequences of the Second Empire's industrialization. Today we are living through the same struggles between Islam and Christianity, East and West. This struggle never came to an end. One of the basic elements is demography" (Szocs 2021). Zemmour, however, did not perform well in the 2022 presidential elections, and his ultimate effect may have been the framing of Le Pen as a moderate politician when contrasted against his far-right radicalism.

In the presidential elections of 2022, Marine Le Pen again emerged as the main challenger to Macron. It was conceivable that Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began less than two months before the first round of voting, might damage Le Pen and decrease support for National Rally. Le Pen had been a supporter of the Russian president, dismissed NATO as an anachronism, and is alleged to have received funding from the Russian government. Le Pen, however, condemned the invasion, and the issue appears to have had little impact on her popularity. In the first round of voting, she received a party record 23% of the vote and was second place behind Macron. In a speech celebrating her winning through to the second round, Le Pen reiterated her core theme: globalist elites have put French civilization in a perilous position, and only Le Pen and her party can stop the destruction of French culture and identity. At stake in the election, Le Pen claimed, "is not just a political decision", but a "choice of society, even a choice of civilization" (France24 2022).

Attempting to exploit feelings of ontological insecurity within French society, Le Pen suggested that a vote for Macron was a vote for turning France into an entirely different country, and for orienting France toward a different (though unnamed) civilization altogether. Le Pen promised that, should she win, her party would "defend the French language, our culture, our civilization", "secular society", and "equality between men and women" (France24 2022). She would "protect people from the power of money" and ensure France remained a sovereign nation (France24 2022). Leaning on typical populist anti-elite rhetoric, she promised that the "ignored" citizens of France would be listened to under her regime, and that the people would again be able to live in a secure environment (France24 2022). If elected president, she claimed, the "younger generation" would find a champion in her, and all French would be allowed to express their political opinions without fear and be heard. She also indicated she would deal with unnamed "migrants" and solve France's immigration problem (France24 2022). Finally, Le Pen promised she would restore France's "prosperity and grandeur" if elected (Harris 2022).

Le Pen achieved her best result in a second round of a presidential election, winning more than 41% of the vote, but was defeated by Macron. In the supposed battle for "civilization" that was the 2022 French election, Macron's vision of France as a home of cosmopolitan European civilization proved more popular than Le Pen's nationalist conception of French civilization as secularized Judeo-Christianity.

4. Civilizational Populism in Poland: Law and Justice Party

Right-wing populism is a powerful force throughout Central Europe, particularly within the Visegrad group of nations: Poland, Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia. Explicit right-wing populist parties govern Poland and Hungary, and they have increasingly dominated—through a variety of means—the institutions and overall political discourse within their respective nations.

The leaders of Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS), which has governed since 2015, fashion themselves as defenders of Christian values and identity not merely in Poland, but

also throughout Europe (Stanley 2016, p. 63). PiS has claimed, in rather grandiose terms, that among the party's core aims is the re-Christianization of Europe. PiS is a right-wing populist party formed in 2001 by twin brothers Jarosław and Lech Kaczyński. PiS was not the first party the brothers created. In 1990, following the collapse of communism and the Polish People's Republic, the Kaczyńskis founded the Centre Agreement (PC), a party that "under-scored legalism, tradition, as well as the importance of the Catholic Church and Catholic Social Teaching" (Pytlaś 2021, p. 341). The PC quickly became part of a conservative-led minority government in Poland (Pytlaś 2021, p. 341). However, when that same government lost power following a no confidence vote, the PC began to claim that communists and liberals had hijacked the transition from communism to democracy (Pytlaś 2021). The notion that liberals were an enemy of the Polish people, and were acting against their interest, thus made an early appearance in the Kaczyńskis' rhetoric in 1992, and it would become a hallmark of their populist discourse in years to come.

In 2001, the Kaczyńskis formed a new party: Law and Justice. The party's name reflected two of their foremost concerns, and it grew in popularity following the "collapse of the incumbent centre-right electoral coalition" (Pytlaś 2021, p. 341). PiS, in a typically populist manner, portrayed the government as corrupt and criminal, and claimed that PiS would defend the interests of "the people" (Pytlaś 2021; Stanley 2016). PiS presented itself as a social-conservative party that would end Poland's corruption problem, establish law and order, and give voice to the people ignored by Poland's liberal elites. PiS, despite having existed for a mere four years, won the largest share of votes (27%) at the 2005 Polish elections. Having established itself as the largest party in the country, PiS attempted to form a government. However, this task proved difficult, as the party could not negotiate an agreement with Civic Platform, a center-right (social conservative, economic liberal) party. PiS formed an unstable minority government with minor party support from the religious conservative League of Polish Families "and the agrarian-populist Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland party" (Pytlaś 2021, p. 341; Stanley 2016), which collapsed in 2007. The party then entered a period of opposition, during which it attempted to portray Poland's governing parties as illegitimate and corrupt (Pytlaś 2021, p. 342).

As part of this effort to delegitimize opposing parties, PiS increased its populist rhetoric by claiming to uniquely represent the will of the Polish people and to be defending the Polish nation from foreign and domestic threats. The party also became increasingly anti-liberal and began to emphasize the difference between its own "social-solidaristic" policies and worldview and the socially destructive "liberal" worldview of its centrist enemies (Pytlaś 2021, pp. 341–42; Szczerbiak 2007). As part of PiS' anti-liberalism, the party began to assert the importance of protecting Poland's Catholic values and identity, which it claimed were being attacked by Poland's liberal and leftist parties (Stanley 2016; Pytlaś 2021). Equally, the party increasingly portrayed LGBT Poles as a threat to the Catholic values of the Polish people, and therefore, sought to curtail their growing rights within the nation (Stanley 2016).

The party's populist delegitimization efforts paid off in 2015, when PiS returned to power, winning over 37.6% of the vote in the elections and decisively defeating its center-right rival, Civic Platform (Markowski 2016). Once in power, PiS put into place its anti-Muslim, anti-liberal agenda. The party's election victory in 2015 coincided with the wider rise of right-wing populist movements across the world, particularly in Europe and the United States. In a time during which wars in the Middle East were producing large flows of refugees, many of whom attempted to find asylum in Europe, PiS proclaimed themselves defenders of Polish sovereignty and declared that they would, if elected, prevent the Muslim majority refugees from entering Poland. Portraying the previous center-right government's agreement to accept Muslim refugees as a "ticking time bomb" set to explode and destroy Poland's homogenous Christian identity, PiS steadfastly refused to allow any Muslims refugees access to or asylum in Poland (Cienski 2017; Stanley 2016, p. 63). This policy, one PiS official declared, was consistent with being a "good Christian" (Cienski 2017). PiS rhetoric during the mid-2010s claimed that Muslim immigrants were "Today

refugees, tomorrow terrorists!”, and that under PiS rule, Poland would become “free of Islam!” (Bachman 2016).

Civilizationalism in Jarosław Kaczyński's and PiS' Discourse

Christian civilizationism plays an important role in justifying PiS' immigration policies. Party leader and, after 2020, Deputy Prime Minister of Poland (if not *de facto* leader), Jarosław Kaczyński, defended PiS's anti-Muslim policies by framing Muslim immigration to Poland as an element within a larger battle between two civilizational opposites: Christianity and Islam. According to Kaczyński, Poland's “Freedom and independence” is a product of its “Christian heritage” (Cap 2018, pp. 388–89). Thus, the presence of Islam in Poland, Kaczyński claims, directly threatens not merely the values and identity of the Polish people, but also the very existence of Poland as a nation state. Christianity, Kaczyński suggests, safeguards Polish “freedom”, “peace, stability and economic progress”. Moreover, he claims that by preventing Muslim immigration, his party will ensure that the Polish people remain “masters of their own house” (Cap 2018, p. 389). PiS claimed that Islam and Christianity “simply cannot coexist” within a single nation due to the vast difference between the two in terms of their values, identity, and religious expression (Cap 2018, p. 389). Muslims were thus constructed in the PiS rhetoric as an existential danger to “the people” and an “other” that had to be excluded from the nation in order to preserve its culture, identity, and independence. In language purposefully used to create a sense of fear and dehumanizing disgust, PiS claimed that Muslim refugees carry “all sorts of parasites and protozoa”, and therefore, cause “danger” to Poland's people (Ciencki 2017). Moreover, PiS used new laws to permit the Internal Security Agency to carry out deportations of Muslims in order to make Poland “safer” (Pikulicka-Wilczewska 2020).

On the other hand, Christian Syrian migrants were welcomed into Poland by PiS, just as the party has shown welcome to Ukrainian refugees escaping from the Russian invasion of their nation (Dudzińska and Kotnarowski 2019). The party justified the anti-Muslim discrimination by claiming that Islam was too powerful to allow into an already weakened Europe: “Because the West has no religious identity, it is easy to dominate them, the French or Germans . . . If this happens, then really Islam will just eat us” (Dudzińska and Kotnarowski 2019). PiS, however, differs from many other right-wing populist parties insofar as it does not declare Islam incompatible with Christianity on the grounds that Islam cannot be secularized or is too conservative. Rather, PiS claims that non-Christian “ethics” such as secularism and liberalism are forms of “nihilism”, and that the “re-Christianization of Europe” is a priority for the government (Mazurczak 2019). Kaczyński, furthermore, called for a “moral revolution” and the creation of a “fourth Republic” in Poland that, once established, would be strong enough to withstand the draw of liberalism, Islam, and other forces, which would otherwise destroy the country's conservative Catholic values and identity (The Economist 2015).

To make this moral revolution a reality, PiS began to use non-liberal, undemocratic tactics to ensure that its agenda was supported by the Polish media and the judicial system (Duncan and Macy 2020–2021; Pytlaś 2021; NPR 2020). The seizing of control over the Polish media, universities, and public institutions is important to PiS, as the party recognizes how the battle to control discourse is vital if the party's social revolution is to continue into the future and after the party inevitably loses government. PiS does not want its achievements to be immediately erased by a new liberal or leftist government and thus seeks to prevent the school system from teaching students liberal values. Thus, PiS swiftly moved to force “Poland's public television and radio network, along with a number of partially state-owned enterprises . . . to strictly adhere to the party line” (Hoppe and Puhl 2016). “Museums, theaters and film producers”, furthermore, would “only receive government subsidies if they produce” so-called “National content” or content that does not challenge the nationalist, social conservatism of the ruling party (Hoppe and Puhl 2016). Kaczyński defended these policies by claiming that Poland's media “needs to be corrected, put in order, because at the moment we have a colonial mentality” (Tillies 2020a). These

actions are part of PiS and Kaczyński's "cultural counterrevolution", which is allegedly being waged against liberals and leftists who would introduce gay marriage and ultimately admit vast numbers of Muslim immigrants into Poland (Hoppe and Puhl 2016).

Kaczyński and his party maintain that Poland and Europe are engulfed in a crisis in which leftists and Muslims represent a threat to Christian civilization. The party thus attempts to create a sense of fear and urgency in the Polish public in order to prime them to support PiS' social revolution and the policies that the party claims will save Poland from becoming another homogenized, globalized, de-Christianized, liberal democracy. For example, according to Kaczyński, the world is increasingly dominated by commercial interests and people who want societies "without any identity", and therefore, without structures based on religious and ethnic identities, and which are instead a mere "collection of consumers" (TVP World 2020). Nation states and churches, Kaczyński claims, are perceived by these interest groups as an "obstacle" to be overcome (TVP World 2020). Liberalism is, therefore, framed by PiS as a deleterious force attacking the core elements of Polish identity: Christianity and Polish ethnicity.

Opposition to "LGBT ideology" is a key element of PiS' populism. For example, Kaczyński has claimed that his party will not allow Poland to become like Ireland, a nation he calls a "Catholic wilderness with rampant LGBT ideology" (Tillies 2020a). Kaczyński also claims that LGBT ideology threatens "our civilization", and that his party will not let it "defeat" the Polish people. Therefore, he commits his party to fighting LGBT ideology, particularly within schools and universities, where the party has proposed "a prohibition on the promotion of LGBT ideology and on conducting various [forms of] gender studies" (Tillies 2020b). This rhetoric is effective in drawing together fear among parents that their children will be drawn to homosexuality, and perhaps more significantly, transexual or non-binary identities, as part of a liberal-engineered social contagion, with deeper fears that Polish identity, religion, and culture are being erased. PiS, having constructed a civilization crisis, portrays itself as a national savior, willing to take decisive action to prevent the destruction of "our civilization". Thus, Kaczyński claims he will insist that schools teach children right from wrong and try to inculcate them with the values that will ensure Christian civilization in Poland will be perpetuated well into the future. He warns the Polish people that PiS' anti-LGBT actions will draw accusations of homophobia and Nazism from European Union nations, but maintains his actions are necessary and should not be compared to totalitarianism (TVP World 2020).

PiS' parliamentary election victories in 2015 and 2019 demonstrate the continuing power of its populism. Although the party lost its upper house majority in the elections of 2019, PiS won a majority of 235 seats in Poland's 460 parliament, triumphing over Civic Platform, which again saw its vote decrease (Markowski 2020). PiS' victory in 2019, which occurred despite widespread opposition throughout the European Union to its policies on immigration and LGBT issues, suggests that its populist discourse has proven highly effective. PiS' ability to divide Polish society between virtuous Christian people and their enemies, liberal elites, purveyors of LGBT ideology, and Muslims, and moreover, to frame the battle between these two forces as a crisis in which Christian civilization is threatened, appears to have given the party unprecedented support in the post-Communist era.

"Christian civilization" in PiS' discourse appears synonymous with traditional Polish culture and values, and it is a flexible concept that can mean whatever PiS and Kaczyński require it to mean. Equally, "Christian civilization" is defined to an important degree by what it is not: it is not Islamic or the progressive pro-LGBT ideology common in Western Europe. At the same time, while PiS calls for the re-Christianizing of Europe, the party cannot be called religious. The party does not attempt to force Polish people to believe in God or go to Church regularly. Rather, PiS is concerned most with preserving Poland's traditional values—particularly the traditional gender roles and social mores—which it believes are inextricably linked with or predicated on Christianity.

Kaczyński and PiS, having constructed a "virtuous people" and their enemies based on civilizational classification, frame Poland's social problems and major debates as part of

a crisis in which the core “Christian” values of the Polish people are threatened. The party portrays itself as a civilizational and national savior standing in the way of cultural annihilation, and its enemies as threats to “our civilization”. For example, like other right-wing populist parties in Europe, PiS framed the mid-2010s influx of Muslim refugees as a crisis that threatens the nation and the wider Christian civilization to which the nation belongs. Where the National Front framed the Muslim immigrants as inordinately religious and conservative, PiS—a non-secularist conservative party—framed the immigrants as culturally different, violent, and diseased. Moreover, they portrayed Muslims as an instrument of liberals, who are alleged to be using them to wage war on Christian civilization in Poland. This framing allows PiS to take action to prevent Muslims from entering the country as refugees, and to deport Muslims from the country on the basis that Islam is incompatible with Poland’s Christian culture and values. Moreover, PiS portrays itself as an instrument of “the people’s will” and claims this direct connection gives it the authority to control the media, schools, and universities and re-shape them until they reflect the will of the people. As PiS and Kaczyński claim that “the people” of Poland are Christian and ethnic Poles, and moreover, because Kaczyński appears to believe that Christianity is the only force strong enough to prevent the Islamization of Europe, PiS justifies its attempts to control Poland’s institutions as necessary actions taken to save Poland and restore Christianity to its rightful place at the heart of Polish identity and values.

5. Discussion

This article finds civilizationalism present in the populist discourses of Donald Trump and his administration, Marine Le Pen and her National Rally party, and Jarosław Kaczyński and PiS.

The civilizational populists examined in this article posit that “elites” are immoral insofar as they have both turned away from the “good” religion-derived cultural values of “the people” and permitted or desired the mass immigration of people who do not share the culture, religion, and values of “the people”, instead belonging to a foreign civilization—Islam—with entirely different and even antithetical values. Le Pen and Kaczyński, in particular, define national belonging “and the semantics of self and other” in civilizational terms, and therefore, they define “the people”, “the elite”, and “others” via a civilizational classification scheme (Brubaker 2017a, p. 1193). Le Pen, Kaczyński, and Trump may be called “civilizational populists” under the definition given by Yilmaz and Morieson (2022) insofar as they separate society “into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations that are hostile and present a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the pure people”. However, “the people”, “elites”, and “others” are described by Trump, Le Pen, and Kaczyński in different ways.

Religion and religious identity played a key role in the Trump administration’s civilizational populism, informing its construction of ingroups and outgroups, and even elements of its foreign policy, including its religious freedom agenda and support for Israel. For example, the Trump movement at first largely conformed to the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric established by the George W. Bush administration. Although Trump criticized the decision to go to war with Iraq and the failed nation-building efforts in Afghanistan, unlike his predecessors he made no effort to distinguish between violent radical Islamists and ordinary Muslims, and in doing so, he demonized all Muslims, framing them all as potential terrorists who belong to a religion that “hates” America (Haynes 2020a). On the other hand, Trump and his closest allies claimed that his administration would protect American civilization and its Judeo-Christian culture from Islam (Haynes 2020a). His decision to implement a travel ban on people from a number of Muslim majority nations was predicated on this claim and framed as part of the Trump administration’s efforts to “save” America and Western civilization from Islamic radicalism.

In France, Marine Le Pen claims that elites in the traditional governing parties have ignored the interests of “the people” and betrayed France’s culture and undermined its

civilization. However, Le Pen does not use entirely consistent language when describing the civilization to which the French people belong. At times, the French have their own unique civilization, while at others, the French belong to Christian civilization. Despite this ambiguity, Le Pen is consistent in describing France as a Christian yet secularized nation belonging to the Judeo-Christian world. Equally, she describes two core enemies of France and its secularized Christian culture: globalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Thus, globalists (essentially the French elite) and Muslims are framed as enemies of France and make up the core outgroups constructed in Le Pen’s discourse. Globalists, according to Le Pen, are immoral insofar as they choose to destroy France by permitting mass immigration from majority Muslim nations and encouraging multiculturalism and consumerism (France24 2022; Al Jazeera 2017; Morieson 2021; Roy 2016). While Le Pen portrays Islam as a regressive social force hostile to women, gay people, and Jews, her solution to the problem of Islamic fundamentalism is to strengthen *laïcité* by means such as banning religious clothing from public places, rather than increasing the presence of Christianity in the public sphere.

The civilizationalism of PiS and Jarosław Kaczyński is anti-secular and defines Christian civilization in Poland as a conservative, religious force incompatible with Western liberalism and individualism. Kaczyński does not frame Islam—as Le Pen and Trump do—as a regressive social force incompatible with the liberal values of the West. Rather, he claims Muslims belong to a foreign culture that does not belong within Poland. Moreover, he claims that the liberal values of the West, especially the ideology espoused by LGBT activists, are antithetical to the core values of the Christian civilization that built European and Polish culture. See Table 1.

Table 1. Comparing the case studies.

Case Study	Civilizational Discourse	Outgroups	Ingroups
Trump administration/Donald Trump	United States is a Judeo-Christian power and a core state within Western civilization. The United States and Western civilization are threatened by radical Islam and by elites who do not enforce strict borders.	Muslims (especially during 2016 presidential campaign), illegal immigrants, elites	American Christians, Christians, Jewish people
National Rally/Marine Le Pen	France is a secular nation but is also part of Christian civilization. It is threatened by globalism, which erases its culture, identity, and borders, and permits “Islamic fundamentalism” to destroy French civilization from the inside.	Muslims, globalists, elites	Secular French citizens, Christians
PiS/Jarosław Kaczyński	Poland is a stronghold of Christian civilization. Christian civilization in Europe is threatened by liberal elites, who wish to erase all forms of ethnic and religious identity. Liberal elites encourage mass immigration from Muslim societies and promote anti-Christian LGBT ideology, which presents an existential threat to Christian civilization.	Liberals, LGBT activists, Muslims, elites	Christian ethnic Poles

While within civilizational populist discourses “the boundaries of belonging and the semantics of self and other are reconceptualized in civilizational terms”, in the three cases studied here, the populist leaders use civilizationalism not to eliminate national boundaries, but rather to defend those boundaries (Brubaker 2017a, p. 1193). While Muslim immigration is often the most significant cause of the success of right-wing civilizational populism in Western countries (Mehic 2019), the examples described in this article show that liberalism, globalism, and LGBT ideology and rights may be framed as threats to civilization. In all three cases, Christianity is important insofar as it helps define the identity of “our” civilization and culture. However, Christian piety appears largely absent—or, in the case of Le Pen, entirely absent—from the three populist movements’ discourses. Christianity is instead portrayed as valuable insofar as it helped form “our” civilization and its values, and it may act as a buttress against the intrusion of foreign values via Muslim immigration or

through the activities of LGBT activists and traitorous elites. At the same time, Le Pen and Trump do not describe their respective “civilizations” in a consistent manner. Civilization, in their respective discourses, can mean Western civilization in its widest sense, or it can mean simply the culture of France or the United States. Civilization is thus a flexible term, and in the discourse of right-wing populists, it is often defined not by particular intrinsic and internal qualities, but rather more often by the perceived characteristics of its “other(s)”, especially Islam. It is not explicitly used to describe the boundary of the civilized world, but in some sense and insofar as Islam is portrayed as inferior and dangerous, there is often an implied double meaning in the use of “civilization” by the three populist leaders examined in this article, with Islam being tacitly framed as barbaric and the Judeo-Christian West as civilized.

The electoral successes enjoyed by civilizational populists appear to have been halted in the 2020s. Donald Trump’s failure in 2020 to secure a second term as president, Le Pen’s defeat by Emmanuel Macron in the 2022 presidential elections, and beyond Europe and North America, the narrow defeat of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil by the leftist Lula, might be evidence of the declining power of civilizationism in the democratic world. However, the electoral defeat of certain politicians and political parties—often the result of disparate groups within mainstream politics and public institutions joining forces to prevent a right-wing civilizational populist candidate winning a national election—does not itself demonstrate the defeat of populist civilizationism as an idea. Rather, civilizational populism may especially attractive in an age in which nations that have historically possessed white and Christian super-majorities are becoming increasingly non-white and non-Christian, and in which this process is supported mostly by the highly educated and immigrants themselves, while being opposed by a large group of less educated, mostly male white and Christian, citizens who feel increasingly alienated and fearful.

6. Conclusions

Finally, it is useful to reflect on what unites these three populist movements and the factors that may eventually drive them apart. The growth of Christian civilizational populism is inextricably linked to a “perfect storm” (Brubaker 2017b, p. 377) of events that began with the rise of neoliberal economics in Europe and North America, and the subsequent advent of “a new cultural politics” that “emerged around difference and identity” and thrived “alongside and even coalesce with the rise of neoliberalism” (Robertson and Nestore 2022). Right-wing populists across the West positioned themselves as defenders of national sovereignty and culture against the loose alliance of neoliberals and progressives who embraced mass immigration, cosmopolitanism, and increasingly, a political agenda that sought liberation and rights for LGBT people. Thus, right-wing populists sought to represent citizens who appear to have increasingly felt alienated and, at times, demonized by mainstream center-right and center-left politicians, and who felt that “their” country was being taken from them by illegitimate elites and foreigners. Populists in the West drew greater support and became especially civilizational in character following the Islamist terror attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, the U.S.-led wars that destabilized the Middle East and West Asia, and the subsequent civil conflicts in Syria and Libya that caused or helped facilitate the movement of well over one million mostly Muslim people from the Middle East and North Africa to Western Europe. Were it not for this “perfect storm” of events, it is unlikely that Christian civilizational populism would have become such a powerful factor in right-wing populist politics of the United States. It is, therefore, interesting to speculate on whether, because the United States does not face the same demographic “threat” from Muslims as European nations such as France, right-wing populist movements in the United States will cease positioning themselves as protecting Christian civilization from Islam. It is conceivable that, as the threat of Muslim terrorism continues to fade, right-wing populists will increasingly position themselves as defending Christian civilization from left-wing progressives. On the other hand, it is likely that Christian civilizational populism in Europe will continue to be defined by

an anti-Muslim agenda, especially if low fertility rates persist among non-Muslim ethnic Europeans and the number of Muslims in Europe continues to increase. In both cases, it is interesting to observe how identity is formed in an almost entirely negative fashion. Of course, the concept of Christian or Western civilization is somewhat nebulous, and in the rhetoric of right-wing populists, is akin to an empty (or almost empty) signifier that can be used to define ingroups and outgroups however the populists wish. On the other hand, for many Europeans, the growth of Islam may indeed make them feel in some sense Christian, although this obviously does not mean they believe in the Christian God (Morieson 2021). Rather, as Roy (2013) asserts, the decline of Christianity as a faith—even in Poland, perhaps the most religious nation in Europe (Sadlon 2021)—now allows for a strong Christian identity that even an atheist may possess. It may be, then, that right-wing civilizational populism is especially appealing to Europeans and Americans who feel alienated and sometimes demonized by the new political elite, and who have lost their old identity as the unchallenged “people” of their nation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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