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# The rise of the populist radical right in Western Europe

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**Abstract** Populist radical right (PRR) parties are on the rise in Western Europe. Where do the electoral successes of these parties come from? First, it has been shown that the opening of borders has fuelled the divide between the ‘losers’ and ‘winners’ of globalisation. The ‘losers’ are individuals who feel threatened by international competition. They vote for PRR parties because they agree with their nativist, populist and Eurosceptic positions. Second, various social and political developments have facilitated the success of these parties. Some examples of these developments are increased electoral volatility, the ideological convergence of the mainstream parties, and increasing immigration and unemployment. Third, PRR parties themselves are, to a large extent, responsible for their own successes. Without their increasingly moderated messages and profiles, their often appealing external and internal leaders, and their well-institutionalised party organisations, their (long-term) successes would not have been possible. Most probably, the PRR party family will remain with us for a while.

**Keywords** Populism · Radical right · Euroscepticism · Anti-immigration · Political convergence · Globalisation

## Introduction

Although populist radical right (PRR) parties have been on the rise since approximately the mid-1990s, the elections to the European Parliament in May

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2014 were the most telling mark of their success. Parties such as the National Front (Front National, FN) in France, the UK Independence Party in Britain and the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) in Denmark all attracted about 25 % of the votes and became the biggest parties within their respective countries (Döring and Manow 2015). They were not the only ones. The Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid) in the Netherlands, The Finns (Perussuomalaiset) in Finland, and the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) were also reasonably successful during the European elections. The day after the elections, various media outlets were talking about a 'political earthquake' (see, for instance, Parker et al. 2014).

What is going on in Western European democracies? Where has this upsurge of PRR parties come from? Before it is possible to answer these questions, it is of vital importance to carefully define what we are talking about when we employ the label 'populist radical right'. Which parties belong to the PRR party family and why?

### Defining the undefinable

Various political scientists have aimed to define the PRR party family (see Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1997; Norris 2005). This has led to considerable conceptual fuzziness. Some talk about 'neo-populist' or 'national populist' parties, while others refer to these parties as 'extreme right', 'anti-immigrant' or 'xenophobic'. The Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde (2007) coined the term 'populist radical right'. Scholars are increasingly employing this term and the corresponding definition. For this reason, I will also employ Mudde's definition.

According to Mudde (2007), PRR parties are nativist, authoritarian and populist. Nativism can be defined as 'an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state' (Mudde 2007, 19). Non-native persons could be, for instance, immigrants or people of another race or religion (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). The second attitudinal element that PRR parties share is authoritarianism. PRR parties want their society to be strictly ordered. They therefore place strong emphasis on the importance of law and order. Violations of the rules should be punished severely. The third main attitudinal element of PRR parties is populism. Populism could be seen as a set of ideas according to which the 'good' people are betrayed by an 'evil' elite (Hawkins 2010). Although it is often rather unclear who these parties consider to be 'the people', they are crystal clear about their negative attitude towards the elite (Canovan 2004). The elite is considered to be arrogant, selfish, incompetent and often also corrupt. This critique could be directed towards a political elite (the established political order, the political 'caste'), an economic elite (large companies, bankers in general) or a cultural elite (academics, writers, intellectuals).

Today's PRR parties are also very critical of European unification. Their Eurosceptic attitude fits nicely with their nativist and populist outlook. Negativity

towards immigrants from other European countries<sup>1</sup> and the bureaucratic EU elites who, allegedly, do not listen to the ordinary people's concerns, can be found among virtually all contemporary PRR parties' programmes in Europe. It is important, however, to emphasise that PRR parties need *not* be Eurosceptic. Political parties such as the Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang) in Belgium and the FN, for instance, have not always been negative about the EU.

Although PRR parties have quite a lot of characteristics in common, they also differ from each other in important respects. When it comes, for instance, to attitudes towards homosexuality or foreign policy, different PRR parties can take diametrically opposing positions. Nonetheless, it has been shown that individual parties within the PRR party family do not differ more from each other than parties within the conservative or liberal party families. This does not mean, however, that they are able to successfully collaborate with each other on the international level, as most mainstream parties do. On the contrary, many attempts at international collaboration by PRR parties have failed.

### **Who votes for the PRR and why?**

The reasons why people vote for PRR parties are in line with the ideological positions of these parties. First, PRR voters agree with these parties' nativist outlook. It has been shown that PRR voters tend to be exclusive nationalist—that is, nativist (Dunn forthcoming). More specifically, it has been shown that attitudes towards immigration constitute the main motivation to vote for the PRR (Ivarsflaten 2008; Van der Brug et al. 2000).

Second, various studies have shown that those who vote for PRR parties also tend to be authoritarian, just like the parties themselves. They are in favour of a strictly ordered society and severe punishment in case of violation of the law (Lubbers 2001; Minkenberg 2000). However, a recent comparative study has shown that this need not always be the case: an authoritarian outlook is not a distinguishing characteristic of PRR voters in all Western European countries (Dunn forthcoming).

Third, many cross-national comparative studies demonstrate that those who vote for PRR parties are less satisfied with politics (Arzheimer 2009; Lubbers et al. 2002; Werts et al. 2012). Because PRR parties present themselves as political outsiders, and claim that established parties do not listen to ordinary citizens (Barr 2009), these parties form an attractive alternative for dissatisfied citizens. It is important to emphasise that they need not be real political outsiders; it is sufficient that they portray themselves as maverick outsiders. In fact, many PRR representatives are experienced politicians. Geert Wilders of the Dutch Freedom Party, for instance, is one of the most experienced politicians in parliament.

Fourth, various scholars have also shown that Euroscepticism is strongly related to voting for PRR parties (Arzheimer 2009; Ivarsflaten 2005; Lubbers and

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<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true of Western European populists, who dislike immigrants from Eastern European countries such as Poland and Romania.



Scheepers 2007; Van der Brug et al. 2005; Werts et al. 2012). Many mainstream parties offer moderate messages when it comes to their positions on European integration. Citizens who are strongly Eurosceptic often have little other option than to choose from the parties on the fringes of the political spectrum. Thus because PRR parties present themselves especially clearly as the voice of Eurosceptic individuals, these parties are widely supported by Eurosceptic voters.

The general conclusion is that most individuals vote for PRR parties because they agree with them. They make a rational decision in favour of parties that are ideologically close to them on topics such as immigration, law and order, European integration, and the way in which the political system functions—they are, in other words, more than merely ‘protest voters’ (Van der Brug et al. 2000).

But why exactly do these citizens hold such attitudes? Various scholars have argued that citizens feel threatened by increasing international competition and growing supranational collaboration (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008). These citizens are, in general, less educated employees in traditionally protected sectors of the labour market, who fear that they might lose their jobs and identity. They are the ‘losers of globalisation’ and their attitudes are diametrically opposed to those of the ‘winners of globalisation’, who have positive ideas about cultural diversity and European integration.

## Facilitators of the success of PRR parties<sup>2</sup>

### Political facilitators

To understand the rise of PRR parties, it is not enough to just look at those who vote for these parties. Voter choices are also affected by external structures and processes. To start with, voters are affected by the behaviour and the ideas of the parties that compete with each other for their support. Various studies have shown that PRR parties are more successful when mainstream parties converge on centrist positions (Abedi 2002; Carter 2005; Kitschelt and McGann 1995). Convergence basically means that centre–left parties become less left wing and centre–right parties become less right wing. When this occurs, they create an ideological space for PRR parties. Moreover, the greater the convergence of the mainstream parties, the more rewarding it becomes for PRR parties to express the populist message that the established parties can no longer be distinguished from each other. Often convergence is caused by the coming into being of a grand coalition containing both centre–left and centre–right parties (Arzheimer and Carter 2006). When the most important mainstream parties come together to form a government coalition they are forced to compromise. As a result they

<sup>2</sup> In this section I do not discuss all the possible facilitators of PRR success. Some factors likely to exert an effect on the success of PRR parties still need further study before definitive conclusions can be drawn (e.g. the electoral system, the *cordon sanitaire* and media coverage). I focus only on those facilitators which various studies have persuasively shown exert an effect.

inevitably move closer together.<sup>3</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, the Austrian Social Democrats and conservatives formed a grand coalition. An important outcome of their ideological convergence was the coming into being of an ideological space for the FPÖ. The more successful the FPÖ became, the more the mainstream parties needed each other, the closer they moved together and the more fertile the breeding ground became for the FPÖ's populist anti-establishment message (Heinisch 2008).

### External facilitators

Various other developments have facilitated the rise of PRR parties. First, several scholars have argued that the process of globalisation has set in motion a number of developments which have resulted in PRR successes. The theory is that increasing supranational collaboration (both at the EU level and the global level) has fuelled the above-mentioned distinction between the winners and the losers of globalisation and increased the attractiveness of PRR parties to the 'losers' (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008).

A second process that has affected the success of PRR parties is the process of individualisation, and, more specifically, increased electoral volatility. In the past, most voters remained loyal to one single political party, with which they identified strongly. Today voters in virtually all Western European countries increasingly switch between parties from one election to the next (Drummond 2006; Van der Meer et al. 2012). Without this increased volatility, the success of PRR parties would have been impossible. After all, it is the increased volatility that has made the electorate 'available' to vote for the new PRR parties (Van Kessel 2011). Where would the PRR electorate have come from if all voters had stayed loyal to 'their' parties? Of course, electoral volatility also creates a risk for PRR parties—as it does for mainstream parties. After all, if voters can more easily switch to voting for PRR parties, they can also more easily switch away from these parties.

Third, the success of PRR parties has also been ascribed to (alleged) cultural or economic crises. Various scholars have shown that the number of immigrants in a country affects the success of PRR parties. PRR parties become more successful when the number of immigrants increases (Lubbers et al. 2002; Werts et al. 2012). Moreover, in combination with increasing immigration, unemployment also appears to exert a strong (positive) effect on the success of PRR parties (Arzheimer 2009; Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2007; Golder 2003).

### PRR parties themselves

To a large extent the success of a PRR party is dependent on the PRR party itself. The behaviour of other parties and other social structures and processes offer possibilities and restraints for PRR parties, but the success of these parties is

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<sup>3</sup> Note that this argument also holds for left wing populist parties like The Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) in Greece or We Can! (Podemos) in Spain.



largely dependent on the political messages of the parties themselves, the behaviour of the leaders and the strength of their organisations. In early studies it was argued that the success of the PRR is, to a large extent, due to a new 'winning formula': a strongly nationalist attitude combined with socio-economically right wing (neoliberal) positions (Kitschelt and McGann 1995). Later studies, however, have shown that many modern PRR parties do not owe their success so much to a socio-economically right wing message as to a centrist position on the classical left–right spectrum (De Lange 2007).<sup>4</sup> Another reason for PRR parties' success is that they have created a 'detoxified', more modern image (Mudde 2007), and thereby have differentiated themselves from fascists and (neo-)Nazis (Rydgren 2005).

To get their main message across, strong external leadership is very important to PRR parties. Prior to their electoral breakthrough, a strong and appealing leader can make a huge difference. It is therefore important for PRR party leaders to have strong rhetorical skills, to be media savvy and to know how to appeal to ordinary voters (De Lange and Art 2011). Successful PRR leaders such as Jean-Marie Le Pen (FN), Jörg Haider (FPÖ), Pim Fortuyn (of Pim Fortuyn List, Lijst Pim Fortuyn, LPF) and Umberto Bossi (of the Northern League, Lega Nord) have all been called charismatic leaders.

Yet external leadership is not the only form of leadership that is important. In the longer term, a party also needs a strong internal leader who takes care of the party's organisation, communication with activists and political personnel, and recruitment and education (Eatwell 2004). Because most leaders do not possess both internal and external leadership qualities, many PRR parties divide these tasks up. A good example of this is the FN, in which, while Jean-Marie Le Pen was the external leader, Bruno Mégret assumed the internal leadership (Mudde 2007, 272). Of course, these leadership qualities are also important for other party families. Yet, because mainstream party families such as liberals and conservatives have much more solid electoral bases, individual leadership qualities are of less decisive importance for them.

The organisation of a PRR party matters too. It is not so much the specific form of organisation that affects a party's success,<sup>5</sup> but the degree to which a party is institutionalised. A party is institutionalised when it is no longer a means to an end, but an end in itself. In an institutionalised party, members identify with the party, accept the decisions made by the leader and are loyal to the organisation. A big problem for many new parties (including many PRR parties) is that members and other followers support the leader of the party much more strongly than they support the party itself. This poses a threat to the party if the popularity of the leader dwindles or if the leader is replaced by someone else. Indeed, research has indicated that for PRR parties it is of essential importance that the party is institutionalised before its electoral breakthrough. A problem for

<sup>4</sup> It is important to emphasise that this only holds for the socio-economic left–right position. When it comes to socio-cultural issues (e.g. immigration, the EU), which are considered much more salient by the PRR, these parties maintain their radical positions.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, whether it is hierarchical or horizontal in structure, whether it has members or not and whether it has local branches or is purely a centralised party.

suddenly successful but not institutionalised parties is that they have to find good politicians who are also loyal (De Lange and Art 2011). In contrast to the more established parties, many new PRR parties have not had the time to do this. For example, days after its leader Pim Fortuyn was murdered in 2002, the LPF won 26 out of the 150 seats in the Dutch lower house, and had to deliver 26 parliamentarians—basically from nowhere. Moreover, the party also had to recruit ministers because it had decided to participate in a government coalition. The party was not ready for such responsibility and very soon its politicians were fighting each other. This marked the beginning of the end for the LPF.

## Conclusion

There are various reasons to expect that PRR parties will remain successful in the years to come. First of all, their main programme topics—immigration and European integration—will most likely remain highly salient. And as long as these topics remain on the political and media agenda, it is likely that support for PRR parties will remain high as well (see Walgrave and De Swert 2004). Second, the older generation of PRR leaders with more extremist profiles (e.g. Umberto Bossi and Jean-Marie Le Pen) has been replaced by a younger and more moderate generation (e.g. Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini). This new generation seems to be much more pragmatic and more prepared to cooperate on the international level. As a result, PRR parties can learn from each other's success stories and mistakes. Third, public attitudes towards PRR parties are changing (De Lange et al. 2014). The FN in particular seems to have become increasingly mainstream and now attracts many voters who previously voted for one of the major parties. In sum, it can be expected that the PRR party family will remain with us for a while.

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