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### Societal pessimism: A study of its conceptualization, causes, correlates and consequences

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## CHAPTER 6

# When our country was still our country. Explaining support for Populist Radical Right Parties with societal pessimism<sup>1</sup>

### 6.1 Introduction

This third part of the book examines the correlates and consequences of societal pessimism. This chapter studies the effect of societal pessimism on voting for a Populist Radical Right (PRR) party. In recent decades, the rise of PRR parties has been an important development in Western countries and has been the focus of a comprehensive literature. There are three dominant approaches to explaining support for these parties: economic grievances (socio-structural characteristics), cultural grievances (especially opposition to immigration) and political discontent (or protest) (Van der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2005; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Oesch, 2008). This chapter proposes that societal pessimism should be considered as an additional and possibly overarching characteristic of PRR voters when explaining their electoral potential. It argues that societally pessimistic voters are attracted to the nostalgic character of PRR parties (Betz & Johnson, 2004). This feature of PRR ideology, which is regularly mentioned by theorists but hardly studied empirically among voters, is exemplified in the recurring notion that the best times are in the past (Taggart, 2004).

As we already know from the figures in Chapter 1 and Chapter 5, either the majority or a large minority of citizens in European countries is societally pessimistic. I defined societal pessimism as a sentiment that society is in decline. Societal pessimism is not a mere extrapolation of egotropic concerns but instead a characteristic of voters' worldview that cannot be explained by objective conditions alone. It is an expression

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this chapter is presented as Steenvoorden, E. and Harteveld, E. (2015) Grieving for Grandma's Greener Grass: Explaining Support for Radical Right Parties with Societal Pessimism, at the ECPR General Conference, Montreal, August 26-29.

of concern about unmanageable changes in Western societies that allegedly erode old certainties.

For citizens who are societally pessimistic, PRR parties are attractive because their stances show a similar pessimism and nostalgia for how society used to be. The political program of such parties often aims to radically alter the political and societal status quo (Mudde, 2007) in a way that seeks to ‘restore’ old social, ethno-cultural and political certainties as in the “heartland” (Taggart, 2004; Mudde, 2004). This heartland describes the good old days of yore, which are romanticized and do not necessarily refer to actual past times. Despite the theoretical emphasis on this element in PRR ideology, no attempt has been made to empirically capture this sentiment among voters. I argue and show that societal pessimism is indeed a robust and independent predictor of PRR voting. Whereas I find that societal pessimism is distributed in a tilted U-curve, with higher levels among the Radical Left and PRR end of the political spectrum, societal pessimism is particularly relevant in separating Radical from Mainstream Right voters. Although the data do not allow strong causal claims, the results indicate that societal pessimism is projected onto topics such as immigration and European integration.

This chapter adds to the understanding of PRR voting in several ways. First, by elaborating on the role of nostalgia and societal pessimism, I stress an understudied way in which party ideology and voter sentiment converge. Second, I contribute to the literature by focusing on the differences between PRR voters and those of one of its most important competitors – the Mainstream Right (Van der Brug et al., 2012). This chapter suggests that a large share of the electorally relevant differences between the voters of both party families can be attributed to differences in societal pessimism. Third, this differentiating power of societal pessimism between Mainstream Right voters and PRR voters adds to the understanding of an (emerging) a new axis of political competition centering about the appreciation of the risks in a rapidly globalizing world, transcending old economic Left and Right dichotomies (Kriesi et al., 2008; Azmanova, 2011).

## 6.2 Theory

In this chapter, I follow the definition of Mudde (2007), who proposes nativism, authoritarianism and populism to be the three central features of Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties. Below, I first discuss how nostalgia is a recurrent theme in the description of PRR ideology by leading scholars in the field, and then I continue to argue that this feature of party ideology is mirrored in their voters’ societal pessimism.

Finally, I discuss how societal pessimism relates to the three main approaches on PRR support.

### The Nostalgia of the Populist Radical Right

Although not in the forefront of the theorization of PRR voting, various authors point to a profound sense of nostalgia as a feature of PRR ideology. Betz and Johnson (2004: 311) describe the PRR ideology as “a backward looking reactionary ideology, reflecting a deep sense of nostalgia for the good old days”. This is further elaborated in Taggart’s concept of the so-called “heartland” (Taggart, 2004). In contrast to a utopia, the “heartland” is not an ideal society that can be reached in the future, but a society that used to exist in the past and can be restored in the future. However, Taggart argues, this past is romanticized, and the heartland is an imaginary vision of the past, not a realistic perception. He stresses that the term “heartland” points to an imprecise, ambiguous concept that is felt rather than reasoned. A central feature of the heartland is its “unitary nature” (Taggart, 2004: 278), driven by simplicity. This shows in populist discourse through appeals to ‘the people’ – a notion that parties often do not bother to specify further, but that clearly points to a culturally homogeneous country. This fits with the overall populist ideology, which presents political choices as political truths with clear rights and wrongs (*ibid*). This longing for a previous, imagined country in Western Europe is also signaled by Duyvendak, who refers to it as restorative nostalgia to a national home, instigated by globalization and the presence of immigrants particularly (2011). “The debate over ‘the stolen home’ is deeply nostalgic. The past is portrayed as a closed and conflict-free whole, carried by citizens who all basically shared the same beliefs, norms and traditions” (Duyvendak, 2011: 85).

In a similar vein, and referring to populist parties in general, Canovan discusses the distrust of such parties towards progress as portrayed by mainstream parties (2004). All progressive initiatives, she argues, are advanced by a vanguard, which occupies a privileged status in society. This state of affairs devalues the “opinions, beliefs and way of life of the mass of mankind” (*ibid*: 246). Canovan characterizes populists as relatively suspicious of progress. A new way of doing things is not *per se* superior; instead, longstanding customs and traditions should be taken seriously. Similar to the heartland sentiment, we can label this distrust of progressive policies as backward-looking.

The characterization of far-right parties as the voice of a ‘silent counter-revolution’ (Ignazi, 1992; Ignazi, 2003) is another example of a longing for past times. The leftist revolution of the 1960s has shifted dominant social, moral, legal and political values in Western countries from conservative to progressive. Still, not all citizens appreciated

this shift. However, the opposing, right-wing faction did not have a political actor to speak on its behalf until new right-wing parties emerged to fill this gap. Although Ignazi reserves the specific label 'nostalgic' for the older extreme right parties, which had a fascist ideology that new extreme right parties do not, the silent counter-revolution can also more generally be seen as nostalgic for pre-revolutionary society.

It should be noted, however, that the different elements of this nostalgic heartland do not necessarily have to originate in the same true historical period, nor do all elements have to be shared among all parties. To the contrary, it is argued that "a politics from the heartland is likely to be specific in context" (Taggart, 2004: 285). For instance, some PRR parties – especially in Northwestern Europe – have adopted the defense of freedom of speech and the emancipation of women as important values to be protected against the influx of 'backward' immigrants (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007). This signals the incorporation of relatively recent, culturally progressive 'native norms' in the view of an allegedly immigrant-free heartland. In contrast, other parties, especially in Central-Eastern and Southern Europe, place the traditional family at center stage in their view of the good life of old, therefore defining women's emancipation or gay rights as corrupting elements (Mudde, 2007). Similarly, countries differ in the extent of their experience with mass labor immigration (e.g., Germany, the Netherlands), the presence of pre-statehood national minorities and Roma (Central Europe), or the influence of European integration (Switzerland, Norway), all of which lead to variances in the attributes of the heartland. This suggests that it is the construction of this idealized past in the national context, not some fixed elements within it, which is shared among the PRR.

The authors discussed above have signaled that PRR ideology includes nostalgia for a romanticized past. The other side of this coin is a concern about society's current direction. Saying that things 'used to be better' expresses an unease about developments taking place now. In other words, citizens' views on past, present and future are closely linked. Pessimism about current changes in society is central to the political cleavage of 'opportunity versus risk' proposed by Azmanova (2011). This cleavage is generated by the "social impact of global economic integration" (ibid: 386) and divides society in groups that perceive either increasing insecurities or increasing possibilities. This relates to the idea of 'losers' and 'winners' of globalization (Betz, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2008). Azmanova (2011) argues that political mobilization of the losers versus winners of globalization restructures political competition, and that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the resulting risks-versus-opportunity axis is replacing the classic left-right axis. On the one end of this new axis, both PRR and Radical Left parties can be found to stress risks, whereas Liberal and New Left occupy the other end and stress opportunities.

The sentiment that forms the center of this axis is the anticipation of risks that result from globalization. These risks are clearly economic, but they are also cultural in the sense that open borders and European unification threaten citizens with a homogeneous conception of the nation state (Kriesi et al., 2008). Usually, the extent to which risk perception is either egotropic, based on one's *own position* in society (as a loser or a winner), or results from what awaits *society at large*, remains unspecified. However, for most authors the emphasis is clearly on the former. In contrast, given the evidence discussed below, I argue that our understanding of the 'risks versus opportunity' axis should be broadened to include *sociotropic* evaluations. I expect that anxiety about society's increasing risks is not by necessity only based on citizens' own vulnerability, but also can be grounded in their perception of societal developments more generally. Below, I discuss how this anxiety can be captured by the sentiment of societal pessimism.

### Societal pessimism

If PRR parties indeed thrive on nostalgia for yore and pessimism about society's future, this should be discernable in their electorate's attitudes. In other words, we would expect congruence between party ideology and voter sentiment. An attitude that captures this sentiment is *societal pessimism*. As already argued above, nostalgia and societal pessimism are two sides of the same coin.

There has been no research on the relationship between societal pessimism and PRR voting. However, the conceptualization of societal unease in Chapter 2 shows considerable overlap with PRR ideology. I defined societal unease as "a latent concern about the precarious state of society, which is constituted of the perceived unmanageable deterioration of five fundamental aspects of society: distrust in human capability, loss of ideology, decline of political power, decline of community and socioeconomic vulnerability".

Clearly, all of these five elements are related to PRR ideology. *Distrust of human capability* is very similar to the distrust of progress as described by Canovan (2004). The loss of ideology (i.e., the loss of politicians' vision of society) is replied to by PRRs in the form of the heartland (Taggart, 2004). The *decline of political power* caused by globalization and supranational influence (EU) is a central issue in the PRRs' insistence on returning power to the sovereign nation state. *Decline of community* is another feature of current society that PRR parties want to change by returning to the homogeneous heartland with reestablished moral standards and cultural homogeneity. Finally, a focus on (*personal*) *socioeconomic vulnerability* is increasingly a key feature of PRRs' ideology (Rydgren, 2012), in line with the loser-of-globalization thesis and

Azmanova's (2011) risks-versus-opportunity axis of political mobilization. However, socioeconomic vulnerability as part of societal unease reflects concern about general insecurity for most people in your country, not (per se) for yourself. This *sociotropic* form of concern about socioeconomic vulnerability is part of some PRR parties' call for 'de-globalization' (Mayer, 2013).

Because the concern about where society is heading (whether conceptualized as societal unease or societal pessimism) dovetails nicely with the nostalgic, pessimistic feature of PRRs' ideology, this attitude can be seen as echoing PRRs' pessimism among their electorates. Specifically, my hypothesis is that societal pessimism increases the chance of voting for a PRR party independent of established explanatory variables.

Although the aim here is to better understand PRR support, there are some tentative reasons to expect societal pessimism also to be a relevant feature of Radical Left voters. The Radical Left is not studied as a party family nearly as much as the PRR but is distinguished as a group of parties with their own ideological stance and style, namely, a rejection of capitalism and a stance that economic inequality is the basis of current political and social arrangements (March & Mudde, 2005; March & Rommerskirchen, 2015). What is important here is that such parties are also referred to as populist (March & Mudde, 2005; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Rooduijn, De Lange, & Van der Brug, 2014). Some of the authors above argue that backward views of a romanticized past and the concept of the 'heartland' are features of *populism* more generally, which can also be found on the Radical Left (Canovan, 2004; Taggart, 2004). Therefore, although I apply these theoretical notions to explain PRR voting, I also investigate whether it exists among the Radical Left's voters.

### Established theories on Populist Radical Right voting

How does societal pessimism differ from or relate to existing theories and evidence about determinants of PRR voting? One common model of PRR voting is based on *socio-structural characteristics*. It takes as a starting point that voters' choices are rooted in their structural positions in society. In other words, it assumes a "systematic link between voters' class location and the parties they choose" (Oesch, 2012: 32). Indeed, several socio-economic groups are clearly overrepresented in the electorate of PRR parties, the two most important being the 'petit bourgeoisie' and the 'working classes' (McGann & Kitschelt, 2005; Rydgren, 2012). Many authors have substituted broader category labels to replace the term "working class" to grasp aspects that transcend the classic labor-capital dichotomy. PRR voters often work in particular sectors in particular occupations (Oesch, 2008) and have generally lower levels of education (Ivarsflaten & Stubager, 2012). This combination of cognitive, cultural, and economic resources

divide the 'winners' of globalization, who profit from the economic and cultural consequences of globalization, from its 'losers', who do not (Kriesi et al., 2008; Kriesi et al., 2012). Dovetailing with my societal pessimism hypothesis, this explanation places voters' appreciation of societal changes caused by globalization at center stage in determining their PRR vote. In contrast, however, the losers-of-globalization sentiment above all emphasizes *personal* and *objective* material conditions and can therefore be called an egotropic concern. In contrast, the grievances that constitute societal pessimism include the perception of negative *societal* developments and can be referred to as sociotropic concerns.

Another approach stresses the *protest* element of a PRR vote. This explanation holds that some voters are discontented with the political system and wish to express this discontent by voting for a populist party of whatever color. Obviously, this does not rule out that such discontent might be rooted in socio-structural conditions, as the previous approach would predict. Such parties usually emphasize charismatic leadership, which succeeds in mobilizing voters against the elite. Indeed, PRR voters have indeed been shown to have higher levels of distrust and dissatisfaction with the political system (Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; McGann & Kitschelt, 2005). The protest sentiment is similar to the negative evaluation inherent to societal pessimism. However, societal pessimism is a more diffuse overall negative expectation for society overall, including but not restricted to evaluations of the (political) elite.

A third approach assumes an *ideological* explanation of PRR voting (Van der Brug et al., 2012). Opposition to immigration and immigrants – probably the core element of PRR ideology – is widespread among large parts of the European electorate (Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Mudde, 2007). Voters who are strongly opposed to immigration, finding it a salient topic, will vote for a party that promises to decrease it. Authoritarianism and opposition to European integration are two other relevant issues. Indeed, ideological agreement with PRR parties (on these issues) is usually by far the strongest predictor of PRR voting. The societal pessimism hypothesis is clearly related to this approach, because it also explains PRR voting in terms of ideological congruence between parties and voters. Furthermore, the position of voters on immigration and European integration is likely to be related to societal pessimism, as is shown in Chapter 3. The former two are concrete concerns about specific societal issues, whereas societal pessimism is a more overarching, undirected concern. It is therefore likely that these opinions are related and show some overlap in explaining PRR voting. It is reasonable to expect that the more diffuse sentiment of societal pessimism inspires grievances with regard to more specific issues, such as immigration and European integration.

Therefore, I tentatively investigate the extent to which societal pessimism is expressed *through* concerns such as these.

### 6.3 Data and method

To test my hypothesis, I use wave 6 of the European Social Survey (2012), which offers measures of societal pessimism and all established explanations of PRR voting. This survey includes respondents from 29 European countries. Because the dependent variable indicates whether people voted for a PRR in the last national election, I only include respondents from countries in which a PRR party is included in the questionnaire. Furthermore, because I want to explain PRR voting, I need each PRR to have a sufficient group of voters in the dataset. This means that I must exclude Germany, Italy and Slovenia from the analyses, because less than 20 respondents voted for the PRR parties in these countries. This results in a selection of respondents from 9 countries: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.

Many studies employ models in which PRR voters are compared to all other voters combined. However, because of the diversity of the electoral alternatives, which might differ from the PRR in different ways in each country, it would be an oversimplification to pool all of the other voters (Evans, 2005). Indeed, Zhirkov (2014) shows that different variables distinguish PRR voters from other party families. Following this logic, I compare PRR voters to different relevant subgroups of voters, namely, those of Radical Left parties, Mainstream Left parties, and Mainstream Right parties. The placement of parties in these categories follows the literature. The categorization and definition of Mudde is leading in the context of the PRR parties (2007)<sup>2</sup>, and I follow March and Rommerskirchen in the case of Radical Left parties (2015).<sup>3</sup> The Mainstream Left

2 I also included the *Progress Party* (Fremskrittspartiet) in Norway. Although this party is defined by Mudde as Nonradical Right Populists, a category “closely related to the populist radical right” because of their nativism (2007: 47), it has been labeled as Radical Right by other authors (Norris, 2005). The more recent *Party for Freedom* (PVV) in the Netherlands and *Jobbik* in Hungary are not included in Mudde’s categorization but are usually categorized as PRR in the literature (De Lange & Art, 2011; Karácsony & Róna, 2011).

3 An exception is Denmark, where (to my knowledge) two potential Radical Left parties exist, the Red-Green Alliance and the Socialist People’s Party (SF) (March & Rommerskirchen, 2015). Including them both results in a strong dominance of Denmark (226 of 728) in the category Radical Left. Therefore, I decided to include the Red-Green Alliance because it scores more leftist on a left-right scale (March & Rommerskirchen, 2015) and because the ideology of SF resembles aspects of Green parties, which is also shown by its membership in the European Greens. Because voters of Green parties are assumed to be least risk-oriented, just like liberals (Azmanova, 2011), the SF is not a typical Radical Left party in that respect.

group exists only of Social-Democratic parties. The Mainstream Right comprises both Christian-Democratic and Liberal-Conservative parties, depending on which of the two parties was the largest in 2012 in each country. Although the level of societal pessimism is likely to differ between the voters of these two types of parties, the number of cases does not allow me to further distinguish between them. As was the case with the PRR, the other parties also needed a sufficient number of voters (>20) to be included, which led to the exclusion of the Radical Left in Belgium, Hungary and Switzerland. In Appendix D, Table D1 shows the parties that comprise the groups of Radical Left, Mainstream Left, Mainstream Right, and PRR parties, and Table D2 shows the N of voters for these parties in each country in the data.

To measure societal pessimism, the summary score of two items is used: 'Hard to be hopeful about the future of the world' and 'For most people in this country, life is getting worse'. The answer options were "Disagree strongly" (1) to "Agree strongly" (5). These are two out of the three items that measured societal pessimism in Chapter 3, and the second item shows a great deal of similarity with an item used by Keyes for social actualization (Keyes, 1998; Keyes & Shapiro, 2004), and one of Uslaner for (a lack of) optimism (Uslaner, 2002; Uslaner & Brown, 2005) (as discussed in section 3.2), which I both refer to as the opposite of social pessimism in Chapter 2 (section 2.3). Both items adequately measure the core of societal pessimism, given that they capture a diffusely directed concern over society *in general* going in the wrong direction. The (polychoric) correlation between them is  $r = 0.48$ , which is not too high, but given that the first is very general and the second is more socioeconomic, this is not overly surprising. Because both aspects are important to include in a measure of societal pessimism, to use them both is the best option. Table D3 of Appendix D presents the correlation of these two societal pessimism items per country and shows that it ranges from .40 in France, the Netherlands, and Norway to .51 in Belgium.

As control variables, I include items that cover all of the usual approaches in explaining PRR voting. This enables me to provide as rigorous a test as possible of whether societal pessimism is indeed a factor of influence beyond these established factors in the literature. I control for socio-economic status using the class scheme designed by Oesch (2008): higher-grade service class, lower-grade service class, small business owners, skilled workers and unskilled workers. Furthermore, I include educational level (low, medium and high), the subjective item on 'your place in society' (0-10), an item on source of income (salary or profit versus pension, unemployment benefit, other benefit or other source) and an item about the level of income (household's total net income, in 10 categories).

The protest approach is operationalized to a less satisfactory level because I have only one item, namely, ‘how satisfied with the way democracy works in country’ (0-10). Nonetheless, I consider this an acceptable measure of the protest sentiment.

The models also include the most important issues in the literature on the ideological position of PRR voters, i.e., immigration, European integration and authoritarianism. For standpoint on immigration, I use a summary score of three items (‘immigration bad or good for country’s economy’, ‘country’s cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants’, ‘immigrants make country worse or better place to live’, all reversed). One item measures support for European integration (reversed), and one measures support for authoritarianism (‘important to do what is told and follow rules’).

To check the interrelatedness of these attitudes with societal pessimism, I examined the bivariate correlations. Societal pessimism correlates weakly with authoritarianism (.03) and European integration (.18), and moderately with immigration (.34) and satisfaction with democracy (.41). This suggests that as expected, societal pessimism is related to but not identical to the usual explanations for PRR voting.

Finally, socio-demographic control variables are included, including gender, age, a squared term for age, whether people live in (the suburbs of) a large city versus (a town in) the countryside, level of religiosity (‘How often do you attend religious services apart from special occasions’, ranging 1 to 7: never to every day), and political interest (‘how interested in politics’, reversed).

To facilitate the interpretation of the figures and the comparison of effect sizes in the models, I standardized all of the (scales of) attitudinal items (the variables on societal pessimism, satisfaction with democracy, immigration, European integration, and authoritarianism).

Because societal pessimism is a sociotropic attitude, it should not (for the most part) originate in people’s psychological state or happiness. This a consistent finding not only in the few studies on societal pessimism or social discontent (Eckersley, 2000; Elchardus & Smits, 2007; Eckersley, 2013; Kroll & Delhey, 2013), but also in Chapters 3 and 5. Indeed, I find a moderate relationship between societal pessimism and happiness (.31) and a slightly higher correlation with life satisfaction (.36). To exclude influence from personally oriented pessimism, I use the item on life satisfaction (scale 0-10) in the models.

Because I compare categories of voters, I use multinomial regression analyses, with PRR voters as the reference category. I include country dummies to eliminate all cross-national variation. In the follow-up analyses, in which I focus on the difference between PRR and Mainstream Right voters, I use logistic regression analyses, also with country dummies (not presented for reasons of space). The full models with country

dummies are presented in Table D4 of Appendix D. I show  $y$ -standardized effects in Table 6.3, which enables a comparison of effect sizes across logistic models. Such a comparison is not possible with normal logistic coefficients.

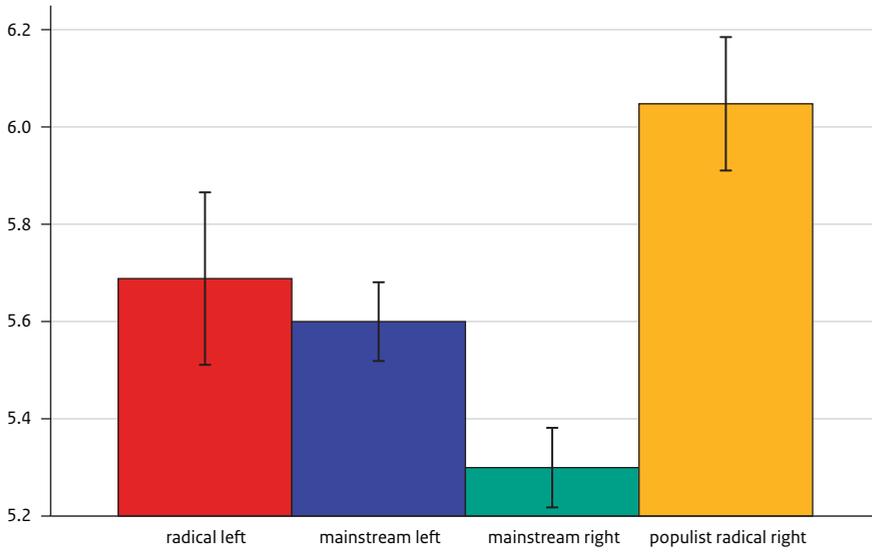
## 6.4 Results

### Societal pessimism across political party categories

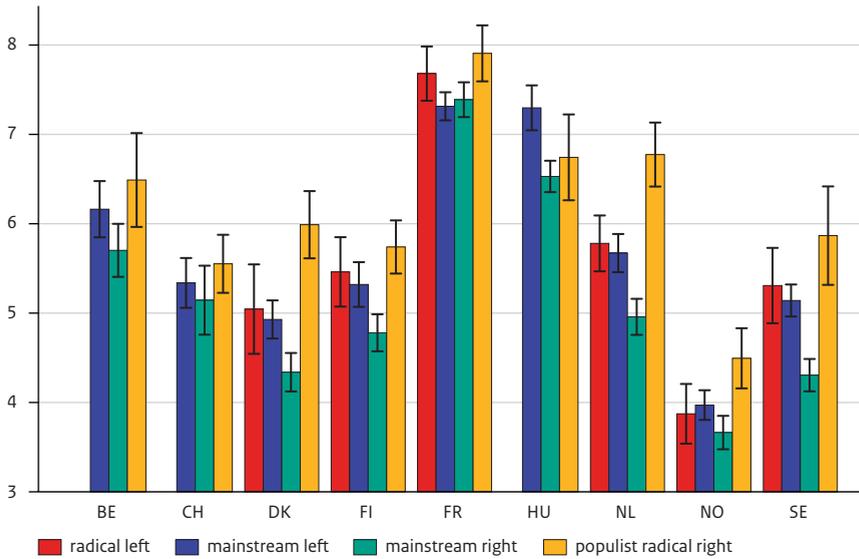
Figure 6.1 shows the mean score on societal pessimism in all countries for the four types of parties. It shows that PRR voters stand out as the most pessimistic of all voters. Whereas the maximum difference of approximately 1 point on the 11-point scale might seem modest, it is important to keep in mind that most of the respondents are located around the middle of the scale ( $M = 5.6$ ,  $SD = 2.2$ ). The second most pessimistic are the Radical Left voters, whereas the Mainstream Right voters are the least pessimistic. Figure 6.1 seems to suggest a tilted U-curve, with the highest level of societal pessimism among the Radical Left and the PRR electorates. However, the difference between Radical Left and Mainstream Left is not significant at the 5% level. Furthermore, Radical Left voters are not nearly as societally pessimistic as PRR voters. This is confirmed in Figure 2, which shows the distribution per country and party category. A variation of the U-curve can be found in all nine countries, but the differences are not very pronounced on the left. In all countries except for Hungary, PRR voters are the most societally pessimistic.

Two preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this descriptive figures. First, societal pessimism sets PRR voters apart from all other voters. This seems to confirm a congruence between PRR parties' nostalgic ideology and their voters' societal pessimism. Second, societal pessimism is a characteristic that separates PRR parties from Mainstream Right parties. This suggests that a pessimistic sentiment that focuses on the risks instead of the opportunities in society does not only apply to egotropic concerns but also translates into a sociotropic concern, thus creating an opposition between PRR and Mainstream Right parties (Azmanova, 2011). However, Radical Left voters' levels of societal pessimism are not similar to those shown by the PRR electorate. It is important to notice, however, that only six cases of the Radical Left are included in the analysis. Further research is therefore welcome.

**Figure 6.1** Distribution of societal pessimism across party categories



**Figure 6.2** Societal pessimism per country and party category



## Using societal pessimism to explain voting for a Populist Radical Right party versus other parties

After these descriptive impressions, I now turn to testing whether these conclusions hold in a multivariate model. Table 6.1 shows a summary of the results of several multinomial logistic regressions – each with a different set of independent variables – with voting for the party groups with PRRs as the reference category. Table 6.1 reports the direction and significance of the societal pessimism variable. Dark-shaded cells indicate that an effect is significant at the 5% level; light-shaded cells indicate significance at the 10% level. The table of the full model is available in Table D4 of the Appendix D. In the model of the first row, societal pessimism is the only explanatory variable (other than country dummies and satisfaction with life). This shows that compared to PRR voters, other voters are significantly less pessimistic. This replicates the pessimistic exceptionalism of PRR voters that is visible in Figure 6.1. Predicted probabilities show that societal pessimism doubles the probability of voting for a PRR party from 9,7% for those low in societal pessimism (-1 standard deviation) to 18,0% for those high in societal pessimism (+1 SD). Clearly, societal pessimism is a strong predictor of voting for a PRR party.

**Table 6.1** Explaining PRR voting with sets of explanations

	Radical Left	Mainstream Left	Mainstream Right
Societal pessimism only	–	–	–
Societal pessimism + socio-demographics	–	–	–
Societal pessimism + attitudes	–	–	–
Full model	x	x	–

In the second row, basic control variables (gender, age, age<sup>2</sup>, urbanization, religiosity and political interest) and socioeconomic variables (social class, educational level, subjective position in society, source of income and level of income) are added. Under these controls, PRR voters continue to stand out as more societally pessimistic than other voters. This means that socio-economic status does not confound the correlation between societal pessimism and voting for the various party groups.

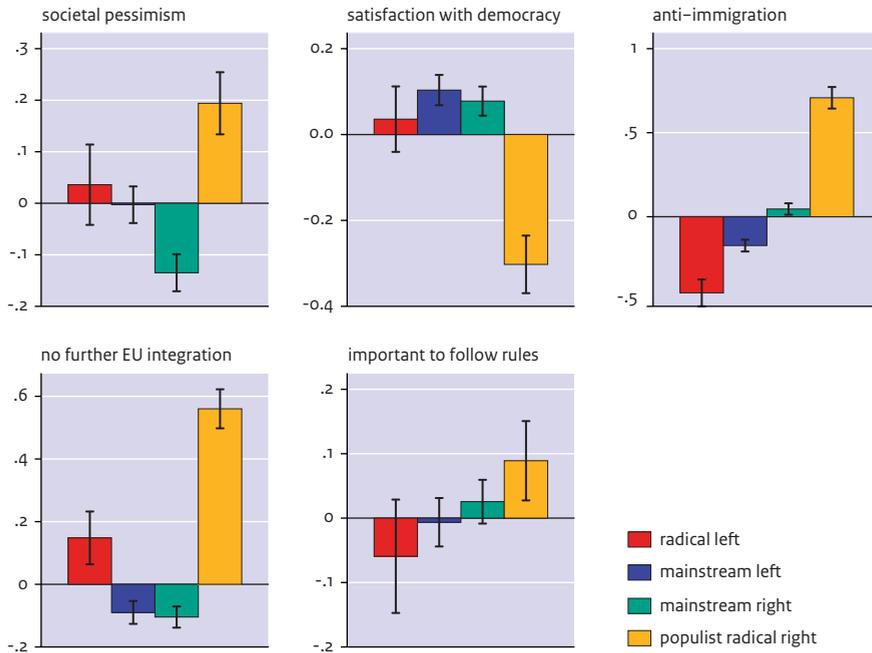
The third row shows the results of a model that includes societal pessimism and attitudes toward a range of issues (immigration, European integration, satisfaction with democracy, authoritarianism). The difference between PRR parties and left-wing parties (both radical and mainstream) is now only marginally significant. However, the effect of societal pessimism continues to hold for the difference between the Mainstream Right and PRR.

The fourth row shows that, controlling for all covariates, societal pessimism still significantly distinguishes PRR from Mainstream Right voting but not from voting for other parties. The effect of societal pessimism is now smaller: the probability of PRR voting compared to Mainstream Right increased from 13,0% to 13,9% in the full model. The smaller effect under the control for a range of other variables suggests that societal pessimism shares explained variance with these other variables (this issue will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter). Still, societal pessimism is a robust and independent factor that distinguishes PRR voters from Mainstream Right voters. This underlines the suggestion that the PRR mobilizes a sentiment that is broader than anticipation of *personal* risks, including an anticipation of societal risks or perceived decline. This is especially interesting because, with respect to other attitudes, such as intolerance of immigrants, the Mainstream and Radical Right voters and parties are relatively similar. Therefore, in the next section I focus on the difference between those two parties.

### Zooming in: Populist Radical Right versus Mainstream Right voters

I now turn to a closer investigation of the role played by societal pessimism in guiding voters to PRR parties rather than to Mainstream Right (MR) parties. I do so in two steps. First, I investigate descriptively the extent to which societal pessimism is unique among the usual explanatory factors in being highly distinct between PRR and MR voters. Second, I estimate logistic models to test the relative weight of societal pessimism in explaining voting for PRR versus MR parties.

Figure 6.3 shows the distribution of five attitudes across Radical Left, Mainstream Left, Mainstream Right and PRR parties. All of the variables were standardized to facilitate comparison among groups, variables and countries. Societal pessimism shows that although the tilted U-curve is already visible in Figure 6.1, it has now undergone a transformation due to standardization. As concluded above, the groups that post the most extreme scores on this attitude are the MR voters and the PRR voters. In contrast, if we look at the figures of the other attitudes that are important predictors of PRR voting, we see that MR and PRR voters are not at opposing extremes. In the case of satisfaction with democracy, PRR voters take an extreme position, whereas MR voters do not. The situation on the issues of immigration and following rules is again different. Here, PRR voters hold an extreme position, and MR voters are most similar to the PRR compared to other parties. The pattern of the EU integration issue is most similar to that of societal pessimism because it also shows a U-curve. However, MR and ML voters take the same position here. Thus, we can conclude that societal pessimism is the only attitude for which MR and PRR stand out as clearly opposing extreme groups.

**Figure 6.3** Distribution of five attitudes related to PRR voting

This does not prove, however, that societal pessimism is the best differentiator between these two electorates. To draw conclusions on that point, Table 6.2 shows the results of a logistic regression on MR and PRR voters. I present the effects after a so-called standardized-Y procedure (Winship & Mare, 1984), which enables comparison of effect size across logistics models. First, in model 1, I included all variables except for societal pessimism. From model 1, it follows that PRR voters are more often male, less educated, employed in lower-grade services or (unskilled) workers than MR voters, and earning a lower income. Furthermore, three of the four attitudes included in model 1 are significant: PRR voters are less satisfied with democracy and more concerned about immigration and European integration. There is no difference between MR and PRR voters in their stance on the importance of following rules. Additionally, PRR voters more often attend religious gatherings. All of these findings are in line with earlier studies on PRR voting.

**Table 6.2** Mainstream Right versus Populist Radical Right voting

	Model 1	Model 2
<b>Demographic characteristics</b>		
gender (male)	0,26 ***	0,27 ***
age	0,01	0,00
age <sup>2</sup>	0,00	0,00
city	-0,02	-0,02
religious attendance	0,10 ***	0,10 ***
<b>Socioeconomic characteristics</b>		
educational level (medium)		
low educated	0,16 **	0,16 **
high educated	-0,23 ***	-0,23 ***
class (higher grade services)		
lower-grade services	0,13 *	0,13
small business owners	0,12	0,11
skilled workers	0,35 ***	0,34 ***
unskilled workers	0,39 ***	0,38 ***
place in society	-0,02	-0,02
income source (salary)		
pension	-0,02	-0,02
unemployment benefit	-0,04	-0,04
other benefit	0,05	0,05
other	-0,15	-0,13
level of income	-0,03 **	-0,02 **
<b>Attitudinal characteristics</b>		
political interest	-0,02	-0,02
satisfaction with democracy	-0,13 ***	-0,12 ***
opposition to EU integration	0,18 ***	0,18 ***
opposition to immigration	0,23 ***	0,22 ***
importance attached to following rules	0,00	0,00
satisfaction with life	-0,01	0,00
societal pessimism		0,07 **
pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	27,8%	28,1%

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001. N=3419

The addition of societal pessimism to model 2 has a significant effect (as we already knew from Table 6.1). Model 2 shows societal pessimism to have a smaller effect (.07) than attitudes on European integration (.18) and immigration (.22), but the difference to satisfaction with democracy is relatively small (.12). Furthermore, a comparison of models 1 and 2 shows that including societal pessimism does not change the effects of other variables. All of the variables that show significance in model 1 also do so in model 2 (except for working in low-grade services, but this variable was already on the edge of significance). In terms of effect sizes, there are only very small changes.

This means that it is safe to conclude that societal pessimism explains variation in PRR voting in addition to and independent from other factors.

Adding societal pessimism increases the explained variance from 27,8% in model 1 to 28,1% in model 2. This means that societal pessimism does not offer a large direct increase in explained variance compared to existing explanatory variables. However, in terms of predicted probabilities, an increase from -1 to +1 SD societal pessimism still increases the probability of PRR voting from 22,9% to 27,6%. Therefore, the effect of societal pessimism remains considerable. Nevertheless, the effect of societal pessimism in model 2 – and its contribution to the explained variance – might be underestimated because societal pessimism manifests itself through the more concrete attitudes. Therefore, the next question to ask is whether the additional explained variance of societal pessimism is small because the effect is mediated through variables included in the model. Although the cross-sectional data do not allow to make strong causal claims, I tentatively investigate this question by assessing which variable appears more causally prior in sequenced block models.

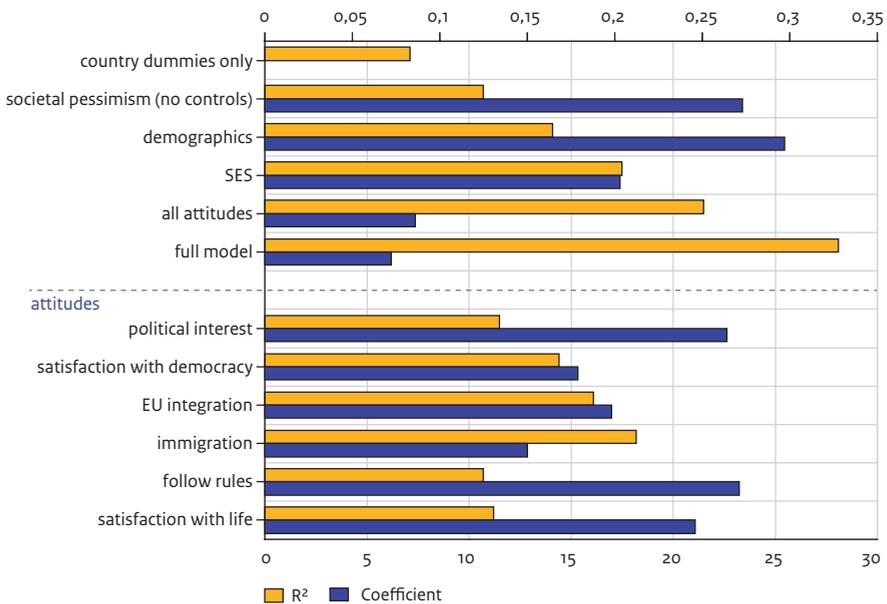
Therefore, I now reverse the order (compared to Table 2) in which I add societal pessimism and the other variables. By first only including pessimism and then adding other factors in turn, we can assess the extent to which societal pessimism's initial effect is affected. A reduction in the effect of societal pessimism would suggest that its effect is mediated by the included variables.<sup>4</sup> The results are summarized in Figure 6.4. The bars in light grey represent the percentage of explained variance and the bars in dark grey represent the effect size of societal pessimism. First, the explained variance increases from 7,1%, when only country dummies are included in the model, to 10,7%, when societal pessimism is added. In itself, societal pessimism thus explains a substantial proportion of the variance in MR versus PRR voting. Furthermore, the effect size of societal pessimism is not affected by including demographic factors (it even increases somewhat). It somewhat decreases by adding socio-economic status. It decreases considerably when controlling for (only) attitudinal factors, which indicates that these factors act as mediators.

I further investigate this by comparing the effect size of societal pessimism when only one attitude is consecutively added in the model. Figure 6.4 suggests that societal

4 Alternatively, such a reduction of the effect of societal pessimism after including a third variable could indicate that the relation between societal pessimism and Radical Right voting was *confounded* by this third variable. This is likely to happen in the case of relatively exogenous socioeconomic variables, but it is less likely with regard to attitudinal positions that are more concrete (our main interest).

pessimism is mostly mediated by three attitudes toward three issues: European integration, immigration and satisfaction with democracy. The other attitudes – on political interest, following rules, and satisfaction with life – do not affect the effect size of societal pessimism. Notwithstanding the fact that testing mediation is impossible here, because that would call for a longitudinal design, this is tentative evidence that societal pessimism is projected onto more concrete issues, which have earlier been identified as predictors of PRR voting. Another way of describing this finding would be to say that societal pessimism is expressed by PRR voters’ standpoints on these three issues.

**Figure 6.4** Effect size and explained variance of societal pessimism across models of voting MR versus PRR



### 6.5 Conclusion and discussion

This chapter proposes that societal pessimism is a defining characteristic of PRR voters, independent from – but possibly also manifesting itself in – established determinants of PRR voting. It hypothesizes that societal pessimism among the electorate is congruent with PRR ideology, which expresses nostalgia for an idealized past, pessimism about the risks of society, and distrust of progress.

I find that PRR voters are indeed the most societally pessimistic group in the nine European countries studied. Furthermore, societal pessimism relates to the general dimension of political competition in a tilted U-curve. The highest levels of societal pessimism can be found among PRR parties; the least societally pessimistic are the MR voters. This pattern, wherein Radical parties cater to the societally pessimistic while mainstream parties draw relatively optimistic voters, fits Azmanova's (2011) positioning of political parties on a risk-opportunity axis. However, instead of personal, egotropic risks, societal pessimism is an expression of concerns about *societal* risks. The analyses thus show that a risk-opportunity cleavage does not emerge exclusively from objective and personal grievances, but instead should be considered to reflect broader concerns about society overall. This shows not only that societal pessimism is an attitude that is politically relevant, but also that it is a characteristic of an important political cleavage.

Furthermore, the results show that societal pessimism significantly decreases the likelihood of voting for any party – Radical Left, Mainstream Left or Mainstream Right – compared to the PRR. This is true even when controlling for either socio-structural indicators, dissatisfaction with democracy, or policy attitudes. In a full model, with all control variables combined, societal pessimism only remains a significant determinant of Mainstream Right versus PRR voting. This finding is even more interesting because these two parties are important electoral competitors. By further zooming in on the difference between Mainstream Right and PRR voters, I find that societal pessimism is the only attitude in the data from which the Mainstream Right and PRR emerge as extreme, opposing groups. Moreover, besides having a direct effect on mainstream versus PRR voting, the data suggest that societal pessimism might be mediated by attitudes about satisfaction with democracy, European integration and – most of all – immigration. With the reservation that testing mediation is not possible with the cross-sectional data used here, it seems to be the case that many of the electorally relevant differences between the voters of the two party families find part of their origins in their different levels of societal pessimism.

It can be concluded that societal pessimism is an additional explanation of PRR voting, consistent with the nostalgia that is argued to be present in PRR ideology (Ignazi, 2003; Canovan, 2004; Taggart, 2004; Mudde, 2004). The results indicate the need for further inquiry into the role of societal pessimism among both PRRs and their electorate. The element of nostalgia in PRR ideology deserves more empirical scrutiny, for instance, by examining PRR manifestos across both countries and elections. Second, by showing that societal pessimism is a defining element separating PRR and MR voters, I provide evidence for the development of a new axis of political competition centering on the appreciation of the risks in a rapidly globalizing world, transcending old left-

right mobilization (Azmanova, 2011). However, Radical Left voters – who might perceive the risks of current society in a manner similar to that of PRR voters – are not nearly as societally pessimistic as PRR supporters. Finally, future research should consider how PRR support increases societal pessimism. Research shows not only that elite cues from the political leaders of one's party affect societal attitudes (Meffert et al., 2006; Lenz, 2009; Slothuus, 2015), but also that voting behavior and attitudes affect one another, resulting in a spiral of increasingly polarized stances between groups of voters (Harteveld, Kokkonen, & Dahlberg, 2015). This means that PRR voting incites a spiral of increasing societal pessimism, possibly deepening the risk-opportunity axis.