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# The appeal of nostalgia: the influence of societal pessimism on support for populist radical right parties

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## ABSTRACT

In the literature, explanations of support for populist radical right (PRR) parties usually focus on voters' socio-structural grievances, political discontent or policy positions. This article suggests an additional and possibly overarching explanation: societal pessimism. The central argument is that the nostalgic character of PRR ideology resonates with societal pessimism among its voters. Using European Social Survey data from 2012, the study compares levels of societal pessimism among PRR, radical left, mainstream left and mainstream right (MR) voters in eight European countries. The results show that societal pessimism is distributed in a tilted U-curve, with the highest levels indeed observed among PRR voters, followed by radical left voters. Societal pessimism increases the chance of a PRR vote (compared to a MR vote) controlling for a range of established factors. Further analyses show that societal pessimism is the only attitude on which MR and PRR voters take opposite, extreme positions. Finally, there is tentative evidence that societal pessimism is channelled through various more specific ideological positions taken by PRR voters, such as opposition to immigration.

**KEYWORDS** Populist radical right; societal pessimism; nostalgia; voting behaviour

The rise of populist radical right (PRR) parties 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) (Ivarsflaten 2008; Oesch 2008; van der Brug *et al.* 2005). We propose that societal pessimism should be regarded as an additional and possibly overarching characteristic of PRR voters when explaining the electoral potential of

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these parties. We argue that voters who are societally pessimistic are attracted to the nostalgic nature of the PRR (Betz and Johnson 2004). This feature of the PRR ideology, which is regularly mentioned by theorists but rarely studied empirically with respect to voters, is exemplified in the recurring notion that the best times are in the past (Taggart 2004). This reactionary turn is not restricted to the European far right; recently, Parker and Barreto (2014: 3) have noted how in the United States the Tea Party wishes to ‘turn the clock back’ to a point in time before their country was ‘being stolen from them.’ In a similar vein, the US president, Donald Trump, who has also been described as populist (Inglehart and Norris 2016), habitually uses the nostalgic slogan ‘Make America great *again*’. We argue that such nostalgia, which is based on the past, is attractive to societally pessimistic voters.

It is important to distinguish societal pessimism from grievances over personal circumstances, which are the focus of the ‘losers of (accelerating) globalisation’ thesis (Kriesi *et al.* 2008, 2012). Citizens do not need to be personally disadvantaged (i.e. having egotropic concerns) to be worried about the direction of society (i.e. expressing sociotropic concerns). In most European countries, a large minority or the majority is pessimistic about society (Steenvoorden and van der Meer 2017). This can be defined as a concern that society is in decline. Rather than a mere extrapolation of egotropic concerns, societal pessimism is a characteristic of voters’ worldviews that cannot be explained by objective conditions alone; this concern is constituted by perceptions of unmanageable changes in Western societies and the alleged erosion of old certainties (Steenvoorden 2015).

PRR parties are attractive to citizens who are societally pessimistic, because they provide a clear vision of how society should change, namely returning to how it used to be before the social changes that have occurred in recent decades. The political programmes of these parties often aim 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 (Duyvendak 2011; Ignazi 1992, 2003; Mudde 2004), as in the ‘heartland’ (Taggart 2004). This heartland describes the ‘good old days’, which are romanticised and do not necessarily refer to how the past actually was. Despite the emphasis on this element of PRR ideology in theoretical contributions, no attempt has been made to empirically capture this attitude among voters. We argue and show that societal pessimism is indeed a robust and independent predictor of PRR voting. We also find that societal pessimism is distributed in a tilted U-curve, with higher levels among the radical left (RL) and PRR ends of the political spectrum, as well as among non-voters. It is particularly relevant when it comes to separating those who vote for PRR and mainstream right (MR) parties.

This adds to the understanding of PRR voting in several ways. First, by elaborating on the role of nostalgia and societal pessimism, we stress an understudied way in which party ideology and voter sentiment converge. Second, we

contribute to the literature by focusing on the differences between PRR voters and the electorate of one of its most important competitors – the MR (van der Brug *et al.* 2012). Third, the differentiating power of societal pessimism between MR and PRR voters adds to the understanding of an (emerging) new axis of political competition that is centred on the appreciation of risks in a rapidly globalising world, transcending old economic left and right dichotomies (Azmanova 2011; Kriesi *et al.* 2008).

## Theory

### *The nostalgia of the populist radical right*

In this article, we follow Mudde's (2007) definition of PRR parties as nativist, authoritarian and populist. Although not at the forefront of the theorising on PRR voting, various authors point to a profound sense of nostalgia as a feature of the PRR ideology. Betz and Johnson (2004: 311) describe this ideology as 'a backward looking reactionary ideology, reflecting a deep sense of nostalgia for the good old days'. This is further elaborated on in Taggart's concept of the 'heartland' (Taggart 2004). In contrast to a utopia, the 'heartland' is not an ideal society that can be achieved in the future, but one that existed in the past and can be restored. As Taggart argues, however, this past is romanticised, with the heartland being an imaginary vision of the past, not a realistic perception. A central feature of the heartland is its 'unitary nature' (Taggart 2004: 278), which is driven by simplicity. This appears in populist discourse through appeals to 'the people', which is a notion that parties often fail to specify further, but which 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 (Taggart 2004). This longing for a previous, imagined country in Western Europe is also signalled by Duyvendak, who refers to it as restorative nostalgia for a national home, which is instigated by globalisation and, in particular, the presence of immigrants: '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, Canovan (2004) discusses the distrust of populist parties of progress as portrayed by mainstream parties. 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' (Canovan 2004: 246). Canovan characterises populists as being 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 characterisation of far-right parties as the voice of a ‘silent counter-revolution’ (Ignazi 1992, 2003) is another example of a longing for the past. The leftist rebellion of the 1960s has shifted dominant social, moral, legal and political values in Western countries from conservative to progressive. Not all citizens appreciated this shift, but 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 the new extreme right does not, the silent counter-revolution can also more generally be seen as nostalgia for pre-revolution society.

Inglehart and Norris (2016) also stress that populist voting reflects a cultural backlash against the consolidation of post-material values. These authors note how Republican candidate Donald Trump’s slogan ‘Make America great again’

appeals nostalgically to a mythical ‘golden past’, especially for older white men, when American society was less diverse, U.S. leadership was unrivalled among Western powers during the Cold War era, threats of terrorism pre-9/11 were in distant lands but not at home, and conventional sex roles for women and men reflected patrimonial power relationships within the family and workforce. (Inglehart and Norris 2016: 16)

They argue that this nostalgia can also be heard among radical right parties in Europe.

It should be noted, however, that the different elements of this nostalgic heartland do not necessarily have to be shared among all PRR parties. On the contrary, it is argued that ‘a politics from the heartland is likely to be specific in context’ (Taggart 2004: 285). As an example, some PRR parties – especially in north-western Europe – have adopted the defence of freedom of speech and the emancipation of women as important values to be protected from the influx of ‘backward’ immigrants (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007). In contrast, PRR parties in Central-Eastern and Southern Europe place the traditional family centre stage in their view of the good old days, and in doing so define women’s emancipation or gay rights as corrupting elements (Mudde 2007). This suggests that it is the construction of this idealised past in the national context, not some fixed elements within it, which is shared among the PRR.

Intimately linked to the PRR’s nostalgia for a romanticised past is its continuing emphasis on the risks and challenges ahead, instead of on chances and opportunities. Pessimism about current changes in society is central to the political cleavage of ‘opportunity versus risk’ proposed by Azmanova (2011). On the one end of this new axis, both PRR and RL parties can be found to stress risks, while Liberal and the Green parties occupy the other end of the political spectrum and emphasise opportunities. This cleavage is generated by the ‘social impact of global economic integration’ (Azmanova 2011: 386) and divides society into groups that perceive either growing insecurities or increasing possibilities. This relates to the idea of the ‘losers’ and ‘winners’ of

globalisation (Betz 1994; Kriesi *et al.* 2008). Azmanova (2011) argues that the political mobilisation of the losers versus the winners restructures political competition, and that in the twenty-first century, the resulting risk-versus-opportunity axis is replacing the classic left–right alignment. At the centre of this axis is the perception of the risks that result from globalisation. 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).

Summarising the characterisation of PRR parties in the literature, we can conclude that their nativist, authoritarian and populist agenda often takes shape in nostalgia as well as pessimism about current societal developments. Below, we discuss how this societal outlook is appealing to societally pessimistic citizens.

### **Societal pessimism**

If PRR parties do indeed thrive on nostalgia for the past and pessimism about society's future, this should be discernible in the attitudes of those who vote for them. In other words, we would expect there to be congruence between the PRR ideology and the attitudes of their electorate. We theorise that this attitude is *societal pessimism*. For societally pessimistic voters, a nostalgic vision is likely to be an attractive solution.

Although a large minority or a majority of citizens in Western countries can be labelled as societal pessimists (European Commission 2013; Gallup 2014), this phenomenon has only been the subject of a few studies to date. Steenvoorden (2015) describes it as a concern that society is in decline and there is a collective powerlessness to change things for the better. Similarly, Bennett (2001) uses the term cultural pessimism to point to the feeling that one's culture is in decline, while Elchardus and Smits (2007: 104) speak of 'a lack of well-being [about being part of] society'. As the opposite of societal pessimism, social actualisation is the 'evaluation of the potential and trajectory of society. This is the belief in the evolution of society and the sense that society has potential which is being realized through its institutions and citizens' (Keyes 1998: 122). In line with previous research, we define societal pessimism as *a concern that society is in decline*.

There is no research to date on the relationship between societal pessimism and PRR voting. A study on a range of attitudes on societal decline and populist attitudes in Flanders does show that those are related (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016). Moreover, a study of 'societal unease', which is a more specific conceptualisation of concern about the state of society and correlates strongly ( $r = 0.99$ ) with broader societal pessimism, shows that this societal unease overlaps considerably with the PRR ideology. Steenvoorden (2015: 86) defines societal unease as 'a latent concern about the precarious state of society', which

is constituted by a perceived unmanageable deterioration of five fundamental aspects: the distrust of human capability, a loss of ideology, the decline of political power, the decline of community and socioeconomic vulnerability.

Clearly, all of these five elements are related to the PRR ideology. The *distrust of human capability* is very similar to the distrust of progress described by Canovan (2004). The *loss of ideology* (i.e. the loss of a vision of what society should be like among politicians) is responded to by the PRR in the form of the heartland (Taggart 2004). The *decline of political power* caused by globalisation and supranational influence (EU) is a central issue in the PRR's insistence on returning power to the sovereign nation state. The *decline of community* is another feature of society today that PRR parties want to change by returning to the homogeneous heartland with re-established moral standards and cultural homogeneity. Finally, a focus on (*personal*) *socioeconomic vulnerability* is increasingly a key feature of PRRs' ideology (Rydgren 2012), and is in line with the loser-of-globalisation thesis and Azmanova's (2011) risks-versus-opportunity axis of political mobilisation. However, socioeconomic vulnerability in the case of societal unease reflects concern about the general insecurity experienced by many of the people in one's country, not (per se) about oneself. This *sociotropic* form of concern about socioeconomic vulnerability is part of the call of some PRR parties for 'de-globalisation' (Mayer 2013).

As the concern about where society is heading (whether conceptualised as societal unease or societal pessimism) dovetails nicely with the nostalgic, pessimistic feature of the PRR ideology, this attitude can be seen as echoing the pessimism felt by the electorates of PRR parties. Moreover, we believe that the PRR's nostalgia for an idealised past is an important pull factor for societally pessimistic voters, as a clear and familiar alternative to current society is provided, namely a promise to restore the country to former times, i.e. to when 'our' country was still 'our' country. In this way, PRR parties offer a straightforward remedy for the current malaise. Consequently, our central hypothesis is the following: *societal pessimism increases the chance of voting for a PRR party, independent of established explanatory variables.*

### **Relation to established theories on populist radical right voting**

How does societal pessimism differ from or relate to existing theories and evidence about the determinants of PRR voting? One common model of such voting is based on *socio-structural characteristics*. This assumes a 'systematic link between voters' class location and the parties they choose' (Oesch 2012: 32). Indeed, several socioeconomic groups are clearly overrepresented in the electorate of PRR parties, with the two most important being the 'petit bourgeoisie' and the 'working classes' (McGann and Kitschelt 2005; Rydgren 2012). PRR voters often work in particular sectors and occupations (Oesch 2008), generally have lower levels of education (Ivarsflaten and Stubager 2012), and are

more often the 'losers of globalisation' (Kriesi *et al.* 2008, 2012). Although the attention this model pays to voters' appreciation of societal changes caused by globalisation is similar to our societal pessimism hypothesis, it emphasises *personal* and *objective* material conditions – i.e. egotropic concerns. 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 express their discontent with the political system by voting for a populist party of whatever colour. Such parties usually emphasise charismatic leadership, which succeeds in mobilising voters against the elite. Indeed, PRR voters have been shown to have higher levels of distrust and dissatisfaction with the political system (Lubbers *et al.* 2002; McGann and Kitschelt 2005). The protest sentiment bears similarity to the negative perception inherent in societal pessimism. However, societal pessimism is a more diffuse concern about society overall, including but not restricted to concerns about the (political) elite.

A third approach assumes an *ideological* explanation for PRR voting (van der Brug *et al.* 2012). Opposition to immigration and immigrants – probably the core element of the PRR ideology – is widespread among large parts of the European electorate (Lubbers *et al.* 2002; Mudde 2007). Voters who are strongly opposed to immigration will vote for a party that promises to reduce 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. 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. Because societal pessimism is found to be the affective equivalent to societal unease (with a very strong correlation as described above), which is theorised to be a latent attitude, and empirically shown to be constituted by perceptions of rather abstract and broad social developments (Steenvoorden 2015), we expect that this characterisation also applies to societal pessimism. And as diffuse, latent attitudes are argued to be projected onto more concrete concerns and anxieties (Bauman 2006; Steenvoorden 2015), we expect that the more diffuse attitude of societal pessimism inspires grievances with regard to more specific issues, such as opposition to immigration and to European integration.

Therefore, we tentatively explore the extent to which societal pessimism is expressed *through* concerns such as these. To this end, we look into mediation between societal pessimism and PRR voting through the more concrete

attitudes we include in the analyses. Despite the limitations of our cross-sectional data, which do not allow tests of causality, these explorations of mediation provide more insight into the linkage between societal pessimism and PRR voting.

## Data and method

We used the European Social Survey of 2012 (wave 6) to test our hypothesis. This offers measures of societal pessimism and all the established explanations for PRR voting. Using this dataset, we selected countries in which a PRR party is included in the questionnaire with a sufficient group of voters (>20). This resulted in the selection of respondents from eight Western European countries: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that these countries differ to various extents in terms of their political culture, political institutions and party ideologies. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to study all of these factors in depth, we do end the Results section with a brief investigation of the pattern of societal pessimism in individual countries.

Our dependent variable is the party a respondent indicates having voted for in the last national election. Due to the difference in the diversity of the electoral alternatives in each country (Evans 2005), as well as the finding that different variables distinguish PRR voters from other party families (Zhirkov 2014), it would be an oversimplification to pool all other voters. As a result, we compare PRR voters to different relevant groups of voters, namely, those of RL, mainstream left (ML) and MR parties. The placement of parties in these categories follows the literature. Mudde's categorisation and definition is the leading view in the context of PRR parties (2013),<sup>2</sup> while we follow March and Rommerskirchen (2015) for the RL.<sup>3</sup> The ML group consists of only social-democratic parties. The MR, meanwhile, comprises both Christian-democratic and liberal-conservative parties, depending on which of the two was the largest in 2012 in each country (the number of cases does not, unfortunately, allow us 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 RL in Belgium and Switzerland. Finally, we also investigated the group of non-voters, who are similar to PRR voters in many respects (Zhirkov 2014). Table 1 shows the parties that comprise the groups of RL, ML, MR and PRR parties, while Table 2 shows the number of voters for these parties in each country in the data.

The summary score of two items is used to measure societal pessimism: 'Hard to be hopeful about the future of the world' and 'For most people in this country, life is getting worse'. The answer options ranged from 'Disagree strongly' (1), via (3) 'Neither agree nor disagree', to 'Agree strongly' (5). There are various validations for the combinations of these two items. Aschauer (2016)

**Table 1.** Overview of parties per group and country.

Country	Radical left	Mainstream left	Mainstream right	Populist radical right
Belgium	–	Socialist Party Differently (SPA)	Christian-Democrat and Flemish (CD&V)	Flemish Interest (VB)
Switzerland	–	Social Democratic Party	FDP. The Liberals	Swiss People's Party (SVP)
Denmark	Red-Green Alliance	Social Democrats	Denmark's Liberal Party (Venstre)	Danish People's Party (DF)
Finland	Left Alliance (VAS)	Social Democratic Party	National Coalition Party	True Finns (PS)
France	Left Front (FDG)/ Radical Left Party (PRG)	Socialist Party	Union for a Popular Movement (UMP)	National Front (FN)
The Netherlands	Socialist Party (SP)	Labour (PvdA)	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	Party for Freedom (PVV)
Norway	Socialist Left Party (VAS)	Social Democrats	Conservative Party (Høyre)	Progress Party (FrP)
Sweden	Left Party (VP)	Social Democratic Party	Moderate Party	Sweden Democrats (SD)

**Table 2.** Number of respondents per party group and country.

Country	Radical Left	Mainstream left	Mainstream right	Populist radical right	Non-voters	Total
Belgium	–	143	195	47	175	560
Switzerland	–	187	123	181	414	905
Denmark	85	360	345	117	91	998
Finland	103	286	370	202	305	1266
France	111	459	358	126	375	1429
Netherlands	142	352	361	96	291	1242
Norway	71	436	305	132	188	1132
Sweden	75	453	447	64	159	1198
Total	587	2905	3137	1038	1998	8730

uses them to measure fear of societal decline, and they are also two of the three items of the measure of societal pessimism proposed by Steenvoorden (2015).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the first item shows a great deal of similarity with one used by Keyes for social actualisation (Keyes 1998; Keyes and Shapiro 2004), and one utilised for (a lack of) optimism (Uslaner 2002; Uslaner and Brown 2005), which we consider the opposite of social pessimism. These items adequately measure the core of societal pessimism, given that they capture a concern over society *in general* going in the wrong direction. The (polychoric) correlation between them is  $r = 0.48$ , which is not particularly high, but given that the first item has a very general scope while the second is more socioeconomic, this is not overly surprising. As it is important to include both elements in a measure of societal pessimism, using them both is the best option. In the summary scale of the two societal pessimism items higher values indicate more societal pessimism ( $M = 5.44$ ;  $SD = 2.34$ ).

As control variables, we include items that cover all of the usual approaches in explaining PRR voting. This enables us 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. We control for *socioeconomic status* using the class scheme designed by Oesch (2008), namely: a higher-grade service class, a lower-grade service class, small business owners, skilled workers and unskilled workers. Furthermore, we include educational level (low, medium and high), a 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 one about the level of income (household's total net income, in 10 categories). The *protest approach* is operationalised to a less satisfactory level, because we have only one item, namely, 'how satisfied [are you] with the way democracy works in [your] country' (0–10). Nonetheless, we consider this to be an acceptable measure of the protests about the political system overall. 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 the respondents' standpoint on immigration, we use a summary score of three items ('immigration [is] bad or good for a country's economy', 'a country's cultural life [is] undermined or enriched by immigrants', 'immigrants make a country a worse or better place to live', all reversed). One item measures support for European integration (reversed) and one support for authoritarianism ('[it is] important to do what [one] is told and follow rules'). As we also specifically examine the differences between MR and PRR voting, we also include a variable on income differences ('government should reduce differences in income levels').

We examined the bivariate correlations to check the interrelatedness of these attitudes with societal pessimism. Societal pessimism correlates weakly with authoritarianism (0.02), European integration (0.18) and income differences (0.22) and moderately with immigration (0.33) and satisfaction with democracy (0.38). This suggests that, as expected, societal pessimism is related to, but not identical to, the usual explanations for PRR voting. We standardised all the (scales of) attitudinal items (the variables on societal pessimism, satisfaction with democracy, immigration, European integration, income differences and authoritarianism) to facilitate the interpretation of the figures and the comparison of effect sizes in the models.

As societal pessimism is a sociotropic attitude, it should not originate exclusively in an individual's personality or happiness. This is a consistent finding in the few studies that exist on societal pessimism or social discontent (Eckersley 2000, 2013; Elchardus and Smits 2007; Kroll and Delhey 2013; Steenvoorden 2015). Indeed, we find a moderate relationship between societal pessimism and happiness (0.31) and a slightly higher correlation with life satisfaction (0.33). We use the item on life satisfaction (scale 0–10) in the models to exclude the influence of personally oriented pessimism.

Finally, sociodemographic control variables are also included: 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 from 1 to 7: never to every day) and political interest ('How interested in politics', reversed).

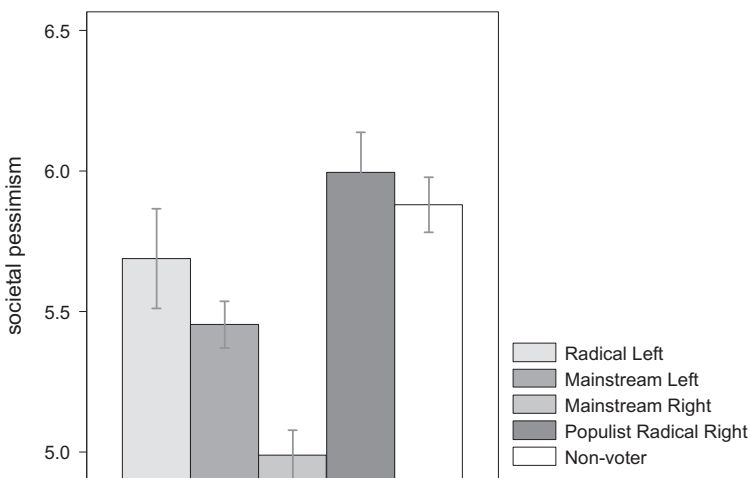
As we compare categories of voters, we use multinomial regression analyses, with PRR voters as the reference category. All the data is pooled to gain statistical power, and country dummies are included to eliminate all cross-national variations. In the follow-up analyses, in which we focus on the difference between PRR and MR voters, we use logistic regression analyses including country dummies. We show  $\gamma$ -standardised effects in Table 4, which enables a comparison of effect sizes across logistic models. Such a comparison is not possible with normal logistic coefficients.

All models use listwise deletion. In the eight countries, a total of 8637 respondents vote for one of the four party families under study. Including all covariates in the full model (model 2 in Table 4) decreases our  $N$  to 7331 respondents (85%; 3419 respondents when comparing only PRR and MR). A replication of intermediate models with this smaller subsample does not produce substantially different results.

## Results

### *Societal pessimism across political party categories*

Figure 1 shows that PRR voters stand out as being the most societally pessimistic, with only non-voters scoring at a similar level. The next highest score is that of the RL, followed by the ML group, while the MR voters are the least



**Figure 1.** Distribution of societal pessimism across party categories.

pessimistic. The pattern in Figure 1 seems to suggest a tilted U-curve, with the highest levels of societal pessimism in the PRR and RL electorates, as well as non-voters. Although the RL voters are not nearly as societally pessimistic as PRR voters, and the difference between the RL and ML is not significant at the 5% level, the relatively high level of societal pessimism among RL voters is remarkable. This fits the assumption that political mobilisation is increasingly determined by the perception of risks versus opportunities in a globalised world, resulting in a political axis on which the RR and RL parties can be placed at one extreme and the MR (and Green parties) at the other (Azmanova 2011).

Two preliminary conclusions can be drawn from Figure 1. First, societal pessimism sets PRR voters apart from all other voters. This seems to confirm a congruence between the nostalgic ideology of PRR parties and the societal pessimism of their electorate. Second, societal pessimism is a characteristic that above all separates PRR voters from MR voters.

### **Explaining populist radical right voting with societal pessimism**

The next question is whether these conclusions hold in a multivariate model. Table 3 reports the direction and significance of the societal pessimism variable in several multinomial logistic regressions of voting for the party groups, with the PRR as the reference category (Appendix 1 Table A1 shows the full model). In the first row of the table, societal pessimism is the only explanatory variable (other than country dummies). This shows that all other voters, as well as non-voters, are significantly less societally pessimistic compared to PRR voters. Predicted probabilities show that societal pessimism significantly increases the probability of voting for a PRR party from 7.7% for those with low societal pessimism (-1 standard deviation) to 14.9% for those with high societal pessimism (+1 SD). Clearly, then, societal pessimism is a strong predictor of voting for a PRR party.

In the second row, basic control variables (gender, age, age<sup>2</sup>, urbanisation, religiosity and political interest, satisfaction with life) 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 being more societally pessimistic than all other voters.

**Table 3.** Explaining PRR voting with sets of explanations.<sup>a</sup>

	Radical left	Mainstream left	Mainstream right	Non-voters
Societal pessimism only	–	–	–	–
Societal pessimism + socio-demographics	–	–	–	–
Societal pessimism + attitudes	x	x	–	x
Full model	x	x	–	x

<sup>a</sup>Significant negative effect in all cases at  $p < .05$  (two sided tests).

This means that demographic and socioeconomic factors do not confound the correlation between societal pessimism and voting for the various party groups.

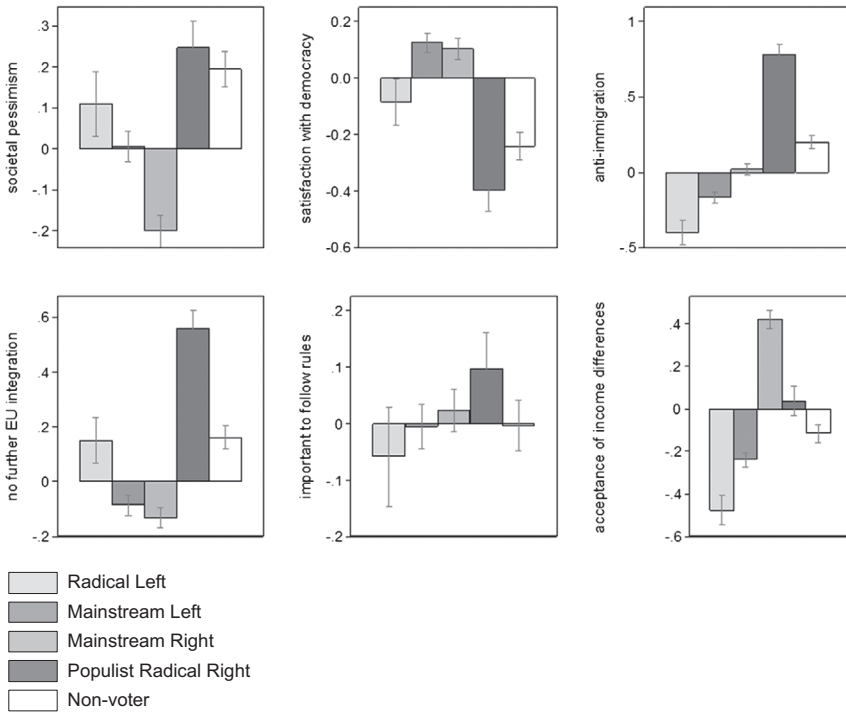
The third row shows the results of a model that includes societal pessimism and attitudes towards a range of issues (immigration, European integration, satisfaction with democracy, authoritarianism, income differences and satisfaction with life). The difference between the PRR and left-wing voters (both radical and mainstream), as well as non-voters, is no longer significant. However, the effect of societal pessimism continues to hold for the difference between the MR and PRR.

The fourth row shows that, when controlling for all the covariates, societal pessimism still significantly distinguishes PRR from MR voters, but not from voting for other parties or not voting. The effect of societal pessimism is now smaller: societal pessimism increases the probability of voting for a PRR party from 10.6% for those low in societal pessimism (-1 standard deviation) to 11.7% for those high in societal pessimism (+1 SD, all other covariates kept at their actual value). Nevertheless, societal pessimism is a robust and independent factor that distinguishes PRR from MR voters. This is especially interesting because, with respect to other attitudes such as intolerance towards immigrants, both the MR and PRR voters as well as parties are relatively similar. Consequently, in the next section we focus on the difference between those two groups of voters.

### ***Zooming in: populist radical right versus mainstream right voters***

We now turn to a closer investigation of the role played by societal pessimism in guiding voters to PRR parties rather than the MR. Figure 2 shows the distribution of six (standardised) scores on attitudinal variables across RL, ML, MR and PRR voters, as well as those who do not vote. As concluded above, the groups that differ most with regard to their level of societal pessimism are the MR and PRR voters (closely followed by non-voters). In contrast, in terms of other attitudes that are important predictors of PRR voting, MR and PRR voters are *not* at opposite extremes. In the case of satisfaction with democracy, PRR voters adopt an extreme (dissatisfied) position, while MR voters do not. On issues of immigration and the importance of following rules, PRR voters again hold extreme positions, but MR voters are the next most concerned group. On income differences, those voting for the MR take an extreme (favourable) position, but PRR voters do not. The pattern of the EU integration issue is most similar to that of societal pessimism, except MR and ML voters take the same position here. As a result, we can conclude that societal pessimism is the only attitude on which MR and PRR voters stand out as opposite extremes.

This does not, however, prove that societal pessimism is the best differentiator between these two electorates. To reach conclusions on this point, Table 4 shows the results of a logistic regression on MR and PRR voters, which is the



**Figure 2.** Distribution of six attitudes related to PRR voting.

detailed outcome of the final row in Table 3 for these two groups (Appendix 2 Table A2 includes country dummies). In order to be able to compare the coefficients of the two logistic models, we used the so-called  $\gamma$ -standardisation method (Winship and Mare 1984), which fixes the variance of the error term. Model 1 (with all the variables except societal pessimism) shows that PRR voters are more often male, less well educated, employed in lower-grade services or are (un)skilled workers than their MR counterparts. They also earn less and attend religious gatherings more often. Furthermore, PRR voters are less satisfied with democracy and more concerned about immigration and European integration. All of these findings are in line with earlier studies on PRR voting.

In model 2, we added societal pessimism. This has a smaller effect (0.06) than attitudes on European integration (0.17) and immigration (0.24), but the differences with respect to satisfaction with democracy (0.10) and income differences (0.08) are small. Furthermore, comparing models 1 and 2 shows that all other variables retain their significance (except for place in society, which was already on the edge of significance). In terms of effect sizes, there are only very small changes in model 2 compared to model 1. This means that it is safe to conclude that societal pessimism explains PRR voting in addition to and independent from other factors.

**Table 4.** Mainstream right versus populist radical right voting.<sup>a</sup>

<i>Demographic characteristics</i>	Model 1	Model 2
Gender (ref: male)	0.27***	0.27***
Age	0.01	0.01
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.00
City	0.00	-0.00
Religious attendance	0.11***	0.11***
<i>Socioeconomic characteristics</i>		
Educational level (ref: medium)		
• less well educated	0.20**	0.20***
• highly educated	-0.20***	-0.20**
Class (ref: higher grade services)		
• lower-grade services	0.10	0.09
• small business owners	0.06	0.05
• skilled workers	0.28***	0.28***
• unskilled workers	0.32***	0.31***
Place in society	-0.03*	-0.03
Income source (ref: salary)		
• pension	-0.01	-0.01
• unemployment benefit	0.12	0.12
• other benefit	0.14	0.14
• other	-0.11	-0.09
Level of income	-0.03**	-0.02**
<i>Attitudinal characteristics</i>		
Political interest	-0.04	-0.04
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.11***	-0.10***
Opposition to EU integration	0.17***	0.17***
Opposition to immigration	0.25***	0.24***
Importance attached to following rules	0.00	0.00
Reducing income differences	0.09***	0.08***
Satisfaction with life	-0.01	0.01
Societal pessimism		0.06**
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (McFadden's)	28.4%	29.4%

<sup>a</sup>Logistic regression, coefficients are *y*-standardised.

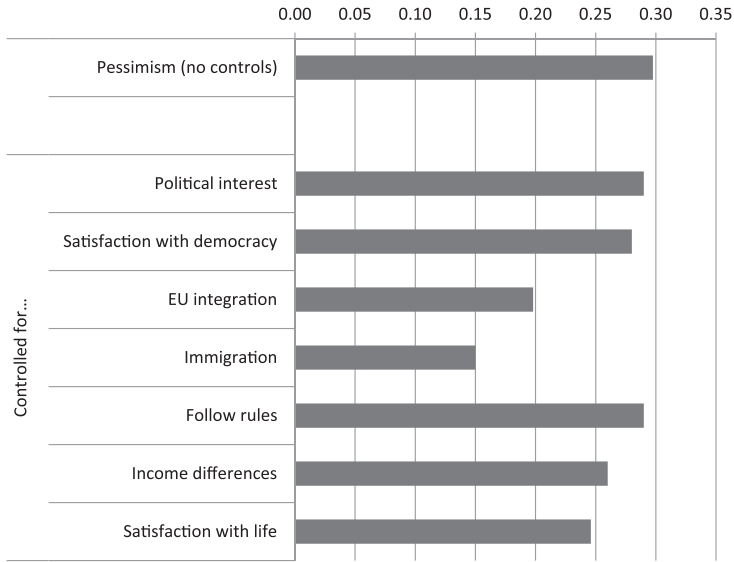
\**p* < 0.05;

\*\**p* < 0.01;

\*\*\**p* < 0.001; *N* = 3419.

The explained variance does not increase much, from 27.8% in model 1 to 28.1% in model 2, which means that societal pessimism does not offer a large direct increase in explained variance compared to the existing explanatory variables. On the other hand, in terms of predicted probabilities, a rise in societal pessimism from -1 to +1 SD in societal pessimism significantly increases the probability of PRR voting (among voters of the right) from 25.0% to 29.2%, which is not negligible. As the increase in *R*<sup>2</sup> brought about by societal pessimism is larger when the other variables are not included, it appears that societal pessimism shares explained variance with these other indicators. This, in turn, suggests that societal pessimism manifests itself through the more concrete attitudes in the model.

Although the cross-sectional data do not allow such causal claims to be made, we tentatively investigate this possibility with hierarchical regressions. The results are summarised in Figure 3, where bars indicate the effect size of



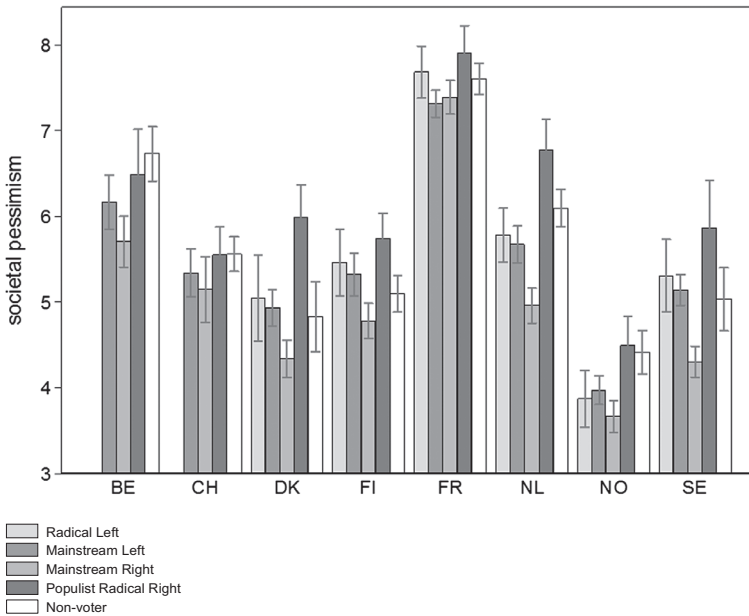
**Figure 3.** Effect size of societal pessimism with single attitudes added (models MR versus PRR voting).

societal pessimism. Societal pessimism seems partly mediated by two attitudes: opposition to European integration and opposition to immigration. This is tentative evidence that societal pessimism is projected onto these two more concrete issues, which have earlier been identified as predictors of PRR voting. Research with an experimental or panel design is warranted to further substantiate this.

### ***Societal pessimism in individual countries***

In Figure 4, as a robustness check, we examine the distribution of societal pessimism per country and party category. This shows that the (tilted) U-curve is not equally present in all nations. Societal pessimism is most clearly correlated with PRR voting in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Indeed, in these countries, it sets PRR voters significantly apart from mainstream voters. Societal pessimism is somewhat less obvious among PRR voters in Belgium, Switzerland and France. In short, it appears that societal pessimism is a clear predictor of PRR voting in the Nordic countries (and the Netherlands), and to a lesser extent in the (mainly Catholic) nations of Belgium, Switzerland and France. This pattern remains after controlling.

A possible explanation can be found in the extent to which public opinion, as well as the political culture, is generally characterised by culturally progressive values. In the Nordic countries (and to some degree in the Netherlands), the 'silent revolution' has been most clearly consolidated in terms of both support



**Figure 4.** Societal pessimism per country and party category.

for and the actual institutionalisation of post-material issues such as gender equality. This creates more space for political actors to mobilise on nostalgia *against* such developments. In contrast, the post-material ‘silent revolution’ might have been weakened by the Catholic Church in France (and to a lesser degree in Belgium).

Although the reasons for these country differences remain speculative, the pattern at least suggests that the degree and nature of the rise of post-material values conditions the extent to which PRR parties can mobilise nostalgia for a pre-revolution society. This does not preclude other countries experiencing the rise of successful PRR parties (which they do), but it does suggest that these PRR parties attract voters for different reasons.

## Conclusion and discussion

In this article, we propose that societal pessimism is a defining characteristic of PRR voters, independent from established determinants of PRR voting. We argue that for those who are societally pessimistic, PRR parties match their societal outlook and offer a solution by suggesting a return to the (idealised) past.

We find that PRR voters are indeed the most societally pessimistic group of voters in the eight 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 (and,

to a lesser extent, the RL and non-voters), while the least societally pessimistic are the MR voters. This pattern, whereby radical parties cater to the societally pessimistic while mainstream parties attract relatively optimistic voters, fits Azmanova's (2011) positioning of political parties on a risk-opportunity axis. This not only means 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, when controlling for socio-structural indicators, societal pessimism significantly reduces the likelihood of voting for any party – RL, ML or MR – as well as not voters compared to PRR voters. In a full model, with both socioeconomic and attitudinal factors that match the policy and protest explanations for PRR voting, societal pessimism only remains a significant determinant of MR versus PRR voting. This finding is even more interesting, because these two parties are important electoral competitors. Societal pessimism also turns out to be the only attitude in the data on which MR and PRR voters are extreme, opposing groups. It can thus be concluded that societal pessimism is an additional explanation of PRR voting, which is triggered by the pessimistic outlook of PRR parties (Azmanova 2011) and their solution in the form of turning back the clock several decades to the idealised past (Canovan 2004; Ignazi 2003; Mudde 2004; Taggart 2004). Finally, besides having a direct effect on mainstream versus PRR voting, the data suggest that societal pessimism might be mediated by opposition to both European integration and immigration. With the reservation that testing mediation is not possible with the cross-sectional data used here, this tentatively suggests that these electorally relevant differences between the voters of the two party families find part of their origin in their different levels of societal pessimism.

The results indicate the need for further inquiry into the role of societal pessimism among PRR parties and their electorate. The element of nostalgia in the 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, we provide evidence for the development of a new axis of political competition centring on the appreciation of the risks in a rapidly globalising world, transcending the old left–right mobilisation (Azmanova 2011).

More research into the relationship between societal pessimism and RL voting, in terms of these parties' ideologies and the attitudes of their electorates, is also warranted, given that these voters show the second highest level of societal pessimism. Although some RL parties have been labelled populist (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013), more research is needed to examine whether the RL ideology includes nostalgia and pessimism. Furthermore, it is important to investigate whether societal pessimism among radical parties of the right and the left is similar or instead differs in its object.

At the same time, while many citizens are societally pessimistic, not all of them vote for the RR (or RL). The precise conditions under which sociotropic concerns are expressed in a radical vote – for instance, in combination with specific egotropic precarious conditions – is an interesting topic for further research. Highly educated but societally pessimistic voters might, for instance, turn to Green parties rather than the PRR for an alternative. Furthermore, cross-national differences between PRR voters deserve more in-depth examination to further study the conditions under which societal pessimism affects PRR voting.

Finally, future research could consider whether and how PRR support in turn *increases* societal pessimism. Research shows not only that elite cues from the political leaders of one's party affect societal attitudes (Lenz 2009; Meffert *et al.* 2006; Slothuus 2015), but also that voting behaviour and attitudes affect one another, resulting in a spiral of increasingly polarised stances between groups of voters (Hartevelde *et al.* 2015). This means that PRR voting incites a spiral of increasing societal pessimism, probably deepening the risk-opportunity axis of political competition.

## Notes

1. In Germany, Italy and Slovenia, fewer than 20 respondents voted for the PRR parties. Although including Hungary does not substantially affect the results, we excluded that country from the analyses because Jobbik is seen in the literature as an extreme right party, rather than a PRR party (Mudde 2013).
2. We also included the Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet) in Norway. Although this party is defined by Mudde (2007: 47) as non-radical right populist, which is a category that is 'closely related to the populist radical right' because of its nativism, it has been labelled as radical right by other authors (Norris 2005).
3. An exception is Denmark, where two potential RL parties exist, the Red-Green Alliance and the Socialist People's Party (SF) (March and Rommelskirchen 2015). Including them both results in the strong dominance of Denmark (226 of 728) in the RL category. We included the Red-Green Alliance because it scores as more leftist on a left-right scale (March and Rommelskirchen 2015), and because the ideology of the SF resembles aspects of Green parties (as their membership in the European Greens indicates). As voters of Green parties are assumed to be least risk-oriented, just like liberals (Azmanova 2011), the SF is not a typical RL party in that respect.
4. The third was: 'Do you consider the Netherlands to be heading in the wrong or in the right direction?'

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix 1

Table A1. Full multinomial regression model of Table 1 (ref. category = RR voters).

	Radical left			Mainstream left			Mainstream right			Did not vote		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender (ref: male)	-0.63	0.13	0.00	-0.58	0.09	0.00	-0.64	0.10	0.00	-0.49	0.10	0.00
Age	-0.05	0.02	0.05	0.04	0.02	0.03	-0.01	0.02	0.41	-0.05	0.02	0.01
Age2	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.24	0.00	0.00	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.09
City	-0.05	0.13	0.73	0.32	0.09	0.00	0.09	0.10	0.36	0.32	0.10	0.00
Religious attendance	0.15	0.06	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.80	-0.19	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.98
<i>Socioeconomic characteristics</i>												
Education (ref: middle)												
• less well educated	-0.07	0.17	0.69	-0.10	0.12	0.40	-0.31	0.12	0.01	0.22	0.12	0.07
• highly educated	1.06	0.20	0.00	0.80	0.16	0.00	0.47	0.16	0.00	0.42	0.17	0.01
Class (ref: higher grade services)												
• lower-grade services	-0.06	0.22	0.79	0.10	0.17	0.55	-0.21	0.17	0.22	0.14	0.19	0.46
• small business owners	-0.79	0.29	0.01	-0.97	0.20	0.00	-0.23	0.19	0.23	-0.10	0.21	0.63
• skilled workers	-0.26	0.22	0.23	-0.22	0.17	0.19	-0.62	0.16	0.00	-0.02	0.18	0.91
• unskilled workers	-0.29	0.25	0.24	-0.34	0.19	0.07	-0.84	0.19	0.00	-0.09	0.20	0.65
Place in society	-0.03	0.04	0.48	-0.02	0.03	0.44	0.10	0.03	0.00	-0.08	0.03	0.01
Income source (ref: salary)												
• pension	-0.41	0.24	0.08	0.00	0.16	0.99	-0.01	0.17	0.95	-0.13	0.18	0.47
• unemployment benefit	0.49	0.37	0.19	-0.12	0.33	0.72	-0.27	0.37	0.47	0.41	0.31	0.19
• other benefit	0.01	0.30	0.96	-0.37	0.25	0.13	-0.44	0.27	0.11	0.06	0.24	0.80
• other	-0.67	0.64	0.29	-0.05	0.41	0.90	0.38	0.38	0.32	0.56	0.39	0.15
Level of income	-0.04	0.03	0.16	-0.02	0.02	0.32	0.08	0.02	0.00	-0.03	0.02	0.12
<i>Attitudinal characteristics</i>												
Political interest	0.17	0.08	0.05	-0.06	0.06	0.29	0.01	0.06	0.88	-0.76	0.06	0.00
Satisfaction with democracy	0.19	0.07	0.01	0.34	0.05	0.00	0.24	0.05	0.00	0.04	0.05	0.43
Opposition to EU integration	0.03	0.07	0.61	-0.29	0.05	0.00	-0.36	0.05	0.00	-0.18	0.05	0.00
Opposition to immigration	-1.25	0.08	0.00	-0.81	0.05	0.00	-0.48	0.05	0.00	-0.69	0.06	0.00
Importance attached to following rules	-0.07	0.06	0.28	-0.03	0.05	0.50	-0.03	0.05	0.53	0.00	0.05	0.98
Income differences	0.84	0.08	0.00	0.43	0.05	0.00	-0.28	0.05	0.00	0.11	0.05	0.04

(Continued)

Table A1. (Continued).

	Radical left			Mainstream left			Mainstream right			Did not vote		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Satisfaction with life	-0.11	0.04	0.00	-0.03	0.03	0.28	0.02	0.03	0.41	-0.10	0.03	0.00
Societal pessimism	0.01	0.08	0.90	-0.03	0.06	0.58	-0.17	0.06	0.00	-0.03	0.06	0.59
Country (Denmark)												
Belgium	-17.28	847.69	0.98	0.01	0.25	0.96	0.88	0.24	0.00	1.59	0.27	0.00
Switzerland	-19.11	796.33	0.98	-1.68	0.20	0.00	-1.73	0.20	0.00	1.14	0.23	0.00
Finland	-1.49	0.24	0.00	-1.38	0.18	0.00	-0.32	0.18	0.08	0.41	0.22	0.07
France	-0.16	0.27	0.54	0.42	0.20	0.04	0.92	0.20	0.00	1.42	0.24	0.00
Netherlands	0.29	0.25	0.25	0.15	0.20	0.45	0.37	0.20	0.07	1.32	0.24	0.00
Norway	-1.03	0.25	0.00	-0.34	0.18	0.06	-0.31	0.18	0.10	0.33	0.23	0.15
Sweden	-0.44	0.27	0.11	0.45	0.21	0.03	1.16	0.21	0.00	0.68	0.26	0.01
Intercept	1.59	0.85	0.06	1.16	0.62	0.06	1.46	0.63	0.02	4.83	0.65	0.00

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; Pseudo  $R^2 = 0.20$ ;  $N = 6417$ .

## Appendix 2

**Table A2.** Mainstream right versus populist radical right voting, including country dummies.

<i>Demographic characteristics</i>	Model 1	Model 2
Gender (ref: male)	0.27**	0.27***
Age	0.01	0.01
Age2	0.00	0.00
City	0.00	-0.00
Religious attendance	0.11**	0.11**
<i>Socioeconomic characteristics</i>		
Educational level (ref: medium)		
• less well educated	0.20**	0.20**
• highly educated	-0.20**	-0.20**
Class (ref: higher grade services)		
• lower-grade services	0.10	0.09
• small business owners	0.06	0.05
• skilled workers	0.28**	0.28**
• unskilled workers	0.32**	0.31**
• place in society	-0.03	-0.03
Income source (ref: salary)		
• pension	-0.01	-0.01
• unemployment benefit	0.12	0.12
• other benefit	0.14	0.14
• other	-0.11	-0.09
Level of income	-0.03**	-0.02
<i>Attitudinal characteristics</i>		
Political interest	-0.04	-0.04
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.11**	-0.10**
Opposition to EU integration	0.17**	0.17**
Opposition to immigration	0.25**	0.24**
Importance attached to following rules	0.00	0.00
Income differences	0.09**	0.08**
Satisfaction with life	-0.01	-0.01
Societal pessimism		0.06
<i>Country (Belgium)</i>		
Switzerland	1.17**	1.17**
Denmark	0.41**	0.42*
Finland	0.70**	0.70**
France	0.06	0.03
Netherlands	0.23	0.22
Norway	0.55**	0.58**
Sweden	0.04	0.06
Pseudo $R^2$	28.4%	29.4%

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ;  $N = 3419$ , no constant presented because these are y-standardised coefficients.