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Explaining the Rise of the Radical Right in Europe

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Summary

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Over the past few decades, the radical right has been the most researched political family in Europe. Consequently, a significant amount of literature has been produced that explores the conceptual, theoretical and empirical dimensions underlying the rise of these political parties. This review article aims to assess the current trends, debates and level of understanding in the academic literature by examining three key questions. What are radical-right parties? How can their electoral successes be explained? What are the consequences of their rise for national and European politics? Although terminology and definitions may differ, radical-right ideology consistently includes authoritarianism, nationalism and opposition to liberal democracy. While their economic positions may be quite diverse, they find common ground on issues such as immigration and tradition. Explanations for the rise of the radical right focus on what attracts voters (demand-side explanations) and on how the parties themselves creatively use the political opportunity structures to gain influence (supply-side explanations). Relations between the radical right and the mainstream parties, as well as the strategies used to counter competitors, have substantial effects on the nature of party competition.

Keywords Political parties – Radical right – Elections – Voting behaviour – Ideology – Political competition



Introduction

Radical-right parties (RRPs) have experienced a considerable surge in popularity and relevance across numerous European nations. These forces are currently the senior governing parties in Hungary and Italy, and until recently one such party was in government in Poland. Moreover, various RRP have participated in governing coalitions across West and Central East Europe, or at least indirectly influence mainstream parties and politics. The rise of radical-right forces extends beyond Europe, as similar trends have been observed globally, for example, in the election of figures such as Donald Trump in the US and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. However, the emergence of these parties and movements, with their radical ideologies, instils great fear in those who believe that the RRP will, among other things, dismantle liberal democracy, foster hatred towards anyone they perceive as different or as an enemy, and hinder the process of European integration. Put simply, the emotions tied to the radical right are immense.

Consequently, a substantial amount of academic research has been conducted to investigate the reasons for these trends and shed light on their consequences. In fact, the volume of literature dedicated to RRP in the last 20 years has been much larger than that on all other political families combined.¹ That being the case, I sought to find out the current state of understanding regarding RRP and what aspects continue to be subjects of debate. Therefore, the purpose of this policy brief is to review the literature dedicated to RRP, focusing on publications from the last two decades. To preserve the synthetic nature of this brief and to make it accessible to non-academic audiences, there is a need to carefully curate a selection of topics and themes. With this in mind, I focus on three specific research questions:

1. How have RRP been conceptualised in the academic literature, specifically in terms of their ideology and characteristics as a political family?
2. What explanations have been provided for their rise?
3. What have been the consequences for national and European politics, particularly in terms of changing the dynamics of political competition?

This brief follows a three-part structure that mirrors the research questions provided above. First, I analyse the RRP concept from an ideological standpoint.

¹ C. Mudde, 'Introduction to the Populist Radical Right', in C. Mudde (ed.), *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1–2.



This is a prerequisite for discussing whether RRP's constitute a cohesive party family, meaning a collection of parties bound by shared ideological principles. The second section examines the theoretical and empirical explanations for the rise of RRP's, adopting a conventional approach that investigates both demand and supply factors. The third part argues that to understand the rise of RRP's, we must examine their relationship with the mainstream parties, such as those belonging to the centre–right, centre–left and liberal parts of the political spectrum. Therefore, it is essential to consider the choices made by both RRP's and other mainstream parties, including policy shifts and broader strategies. The conclusion will summarise these arguments.

What are RRP's?

It is common practice for any academic publication on RRP's to acknowledge that scholars use different definitions, which can lead to conceptual confusion. However, the most popular terms are the 'radical right' and the 'extreme right', which together belong to the 'far right'.² Most authors argue that the greatest contrast between the first two is that the radical right questions the liberal interpretation of democracy but accepts its procedural foundations while the extreme right outright rejects democracy in any form. However, some scholars use the terms 'radical', 'far', and 'extreme' interchangeably, while others exclusively adopt one of these terms; in practice, they analyse similar groups of parties despite their use of different terms. In this review, I will maintain the conventional difference between 'radical right' and 'extreme right' and use the former, as it seems to be the most popular term at the moment.³

At the same time that they use the term 'radical right', some scholars incorporate other adjectives for a more precise definition. The term 'populist radical right' became popular after Cas Mudde's use of it in the title of his influential book, published in 2007.⁴ I will address each component of this term individually.

In lay language, 'populism' seems to refer to an attitude or behaviour whereby someone offers easy solutions to very complex problems—often promising more than can be delivered—uses demagoguery and manipulates those in his or her sphere

² A. L. P. Pirro, 'Far Right: The Significance of an Umbrella Concept', *Nations and Nationalism* 29/1 (2023).

³ K. Arzheimer, 'Explaining Electoral Support for the Radical Right', in J. Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 153.

⁴ C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).



of influence. Thus, the term bears some negative connotations.⁵ From an academic perspective, according to Mudde's widely referenced definition, populism can be understood as a 'thin' ideology that stems from anti-establishment sentiments, leading to the division of society into two distinct, antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' (the vast majority) and 'corrupt elites'. Therefore, parties labelled 'populist' tend to depict themselves as defenders of ordinary citizens, the silent majority, against those they see as part of the mainstream. Populism can transcend right-wing parties and can also be found in left-wing, liberal and other political parties. However, when it comes to the outlook of RRP, the establishment is not limited to political, intellectual and economic elites (who, in the RRP's narrative, always collude rather than compete) but also includes immigrants, ethnic minorities and still others.⁶

Regarding the term 'right', there are multiple interpretations that contribute to ongoing discussions about the basis and current significance of the left–right divide. In its simplest form, this split encompasses economic matters, such as taxation, as well as socio-cultural ones, such as national identity, immigration, and law and order. In the early 1990s, scholars argued that RRP can be presented as a fusion of two distinct traditions. On the one hand, they embraced free-market, neoconservative economic perspectives, drawing upon the legacies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. On the other hand, however, their views on non-economic issues, particularly their anti-immigrant stance, were occasionally extreme, resembling those of the extreme right of the past. This combination of economic and political ideas that led to their electoral breakthrough was famously labelled the 'winning formula' by Herbert Kitschelt. This viewpoint underwent a revision in the 2000s, as Kitschelt and other authors argued that the radical right had veered towards the economic centre in reaction to the changing preferences of their voters.⁷ Mudde provided an equally important critique, arguing that the radical right's focus was never truly on economics, in part because these parties never had enough expertise in this area. Instead, they united their supporters through their views on ideas such as tradition, authority, immigration and European integration. Furthermore, RRP's economic viewpoints exhibit considerable diversity, as these parties purposely highlight topics that appeal to particular demographics

⁵ H-G. Betz, 'The Radical Right and Populism', in J. Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 87.

⁶ J. Rydgren, 'The Sociology of the Radical Right', *Annual Review of Sociology* 33/1 (2007), 245.

⁷ H. Kitschelt, 'Growth and Persistence of the Radical Right in Postindustrial Democracies: Advances and Challenges in Comparative Research', *West European Politics* 30/5 (2007), 1181–4; S. L. de Lange, 'A New Winning Formula?: The Programmatic Appeal of the Radical Right', *Party Politics* 13/4 (2007), 427–8.



while concealing their true positions on other matters to gain broader support.⁸ For all these reasons, when depicting the ‘rightness’ of RRPs, scholars refer to their political and ideological positions rather than to their economic beliefs.⁹

Most writers define the term ‘radical’ by pointing to an ideology—and any group espousing it—that expresses a fundamental critique of the prevailing norms and practices of democratic and social life. From this perspective, radicalism extends beyond right-wing parties and can encompass radical-left groups as well. However, in terms of RRPs, scholars discuss radicalism in two ways: (1) by analysing the content of these parties’ views, which includes a critique of the foundations of liberal democracy and calls for its replacement, and (2) by examining the communication style of these parties, which typically involves aggressive language and radical scare tactics.¹⁰ These arguments will become clearer once we define the core elements of the radical-right ideology.

The ideology of the radical right

The first step in identifying a group of political parties as a political family is to establish the core elements of the ideology that they share across different countries. We can assign an individual party to a specific party family only if we understand the essence of this core.

In trying to determine the ideology of the radical right, one is confronted with an argument that the radical-right ideology encompasses a wide array of positions. Scholars commonly include elements such as authoritarianism, nationalism, anti-democracy, racism and xenophobia as defining characteristics. Although it is beyond the scope of this brief to provide a detailed characterisation of scholars’ opinions over time, Elisabeth Carter contends in a recent review that there is actually a significant level of agreement on the core elements of RRPs’ ideology.¹¹ She maintains that the prevailing consensus among prominent scholars is that the belief system of RRPs can be defined as an ideology primarily encompassing

⁸ J. Rovny, ‘Where Do Radical Right Parties Stand? Position Blurring in Multidimensional Competition’, *European Political Science Review* 5/1 (2013).

⁹ Rydgren, ‘The Sociology of the Radical Right’, 243.

¹⁰ H-G. Betz and C. Johnson, ‘Against the Current—Stemming the Tide: The Nostalgic Ideology of the Contemporary Radical Populist Right’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9/3 (2004), 312; Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 25.

¹¹ E. Carter, ‘Right-Wing Extremism/Radicalism: Reconstructing the Concept’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23/2 (2018), 163.



authoritarianism, nationalism (or nativism) and opposition to democracy (liberal democracy to be precise), accompanied by various additional factors as listed by individual authors.

The version of authoritarianism embraced by RRPs is based on a belief in a strong state governed by law and order, in tradition, in a strict social hierarchy and in the need to severely punish any infringements.¹² There is a desire for the adoption of conventional norms in important realms of social and political existence, particularly with regard to morality and the traditional concept of the family. And there is also a desire for strong, often unchecked leadership.

The origins of RRP nationalism can be traced back to the ethnic notion of the nation, where shared attributes such as common language, faith, history and ancestry play a central role. This outlook excludes individuals who do not possess the aforementioned characteristics, relegating them to a lower status. It represents a combination of nationalism and xenophobia—or at the very least, nationalism accompanied by ostensibly impartial arguments for the incongruity of different cultures, values and identities. This is nativism, which Betz defines as ‘an ideology of exclusion bolstered by a narrative of justification’.¹³ It presents an idealistic view of a unified, ‘pure’ nation-state, which includes the desire for the state to be populated exclusively by members of the ethnic nation whose interests are prioritised, effectively merging the idea of the state and the nation.¹⁴ In general, multiculturalism and relativism are rejected in defence of what they often refer to as ‘Western civilisation’.

The final core characteristic of RRP ideology is resistance against liberal democracy and its principles, such as individualism, universalism, pluralism and the constitutional safeguarding of minority rights. In the view of RRPs, these values work against or even endanger the idea of a nation-state that is culturally uniform. To them, liberal democracy hinders the development of a strong state and diminishes the latter’s ability to achieve its objectives. This is because liberal democracy involves listening to the concerns of different minority groups (which RRPs object to even if the members of these groups are citizens, as the majority are) and acknowledging the role of various veto players. This is why RRPs favour a more powerful executive branch, even if it means weakening the other branches of government. They also advocate for more referendums to get a clear yes-or-no opinion from the ‘pure people’.¹⁵ Overall, in their discourse, they make use

¹² Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 23.

¹³ Betz, *The Radical Right and Populism*, 95.

¹⁴ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 19.

¹⁵ Rydgren, ‘The Sociology of the Radical Right’, 245–6.



of populist slogans to argue that democracy has been transformed into a form of tyranny, as it has been usurped by corrupt elites who neglect the needs of ordinary citizens.

When summarising the core characteristics of RRP ideology, the aim is to create a basic definition that is applicable to every RRP, allowing for distinctions between different party families.¹⁶ From this point of view, it is crucial to note that nationalism and, specifically, populism may also be present in the outlooks of other political parties. What is crucial for the matter at hand is that all three core characteristics should be prominent, with special emphasis on the nativist nature of the RRP ideology.

That some scholars do not consider xenophobia, racism or populism as fundamental aspects of the RRP ideology does not mean that they are not embraced by certain parties within this political group. In fact, quite the opposite is true, and several authors include these characteristics when discussing RRPs. The doctrine of ethno-pluralism deserves attention, as it distinguishes itself from racism by rejecting the hierarchical ranking or assigning of a superior or inferior status to different ethnicities, but rather recognises their distinctness and incompatibilities; however, while this tolerance of others seems potentially positive, it has been accompanied by a corresponding desire for homogenous nation-states.¹⁷

Most scholars compile a list of parties that belong to the RRP family based on these ideological principles. Identifying the core characteristics of the party family based on voter characteristics is much less popular. Similarly, using the party name as a criterion for classification is not reliable since no party within this political family identifies itself as the radical right, unlike socialists, Christian Democrats, greens and other parties whose names signal their political values.¹⁸ Frequently, in fact, the names of RRPs imply affiliation with a completely different party family. The names of the National Rally (Rassemblement National, previously Front National) in France or the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana) provide some insight into their nature, but those of the Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs), Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) and the Swiss People's Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei), which all belong to the radical right, defy this expectation. However, the classification often varies depending on the individual definition of RRP ideology employed and its defining characteristics. According to a recent collaborative project that defined the far right as those parties that are nativist and authoritarian (see above) and that focused on the EU,

¹⁶ E. Carter, 'Right-Wing Extremism/Radicalism: Reconstructing the Concept', 175.

¹⁷ Rydgren, 'The Sociology of the Radical Right', 244.

¹⁸ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 33–5.



the UK, Switzerland, Iceland and Norway, there are a total of 122 far-right political parties in these countries, of which the vast majority belong to the radical group. Of these parties, 95 are classified as 'Eurosceptic' and 83 as 'populist'. Fifty-one had entered the national parliament at one time or another; while Iceland and the Republic of Ireland are the only two countries in which RRP are totally absent.¹⁹

Overall, it is widely accepted that, despite their diverse origins and ideological differences, RRP should be categorised as a party family. Ennsers analysis of manifesto data for 94 parties from 17 Western European countries reveals that RRP have a level of cohesiveness comparable to that of Christian Democrats or conservatives and higher than that of liberals.²⁰ An examination of RRP electorates in different countries produces the same findings. In terms of behaviour, the situation is not as clear as it is with political attitudes. An analysis of the voting record in the European Parliament shows that the radical right is noticeably lacking in cohesiveness, especially compared to the major political groups.²¹

Who votes for the radical right, and why?

In the current literature on RRP, it has become standard practice to distinguish between demand- and supply-side explanations. The challenge remains of how to combine the two in the overall explanation and, even more pressingly, how to determine the complete set of conditions necessary and sufficient for the rise of RRP. Demand-side explanations focus on voters and what attracts them to RRP, such as demographics, preferences, beliefs and experiences. Conversely, supply-side explanations place importance on political parties, their platforms and their approaches to increasing their electoral appeal, along with the political opportunity structure, which includes, among other factors, the electoral system and the media. The various facets of the demand- and supply-side explanations will now be examined one by one.

¹⁹ M. Rooduijn et al., 'The PopuList: A Database of Populist, Far-Left, and Far-Right Parties Using Expert-Informed Qualitative Comparative Classification (EIQCC)', *British Journal of Political Science* (2023).

²⁰ L. Ennsers, 'The Homogeneity of West European Party Families: The Radical Right in Comparative Perspective', *Party Politics* 18/2 (2012), 165–7.

²¹ M. Cavallaro, D. Flacher and M. A. Zanetti, 'Radical Right Parties and European Economic Integration: Evidence From the Seventh European Parliament', *European Union Politics* 19/2 (2018).



Demand-side explanations

The basis for these explanations is the term ‘public grievances’, that is, a set of negative emotions among the electorate resulting from some processes or events that people believe are unfair. The demand side does not deal with what RRPs are or what they do to attract voters but rather with how people’s changing economic, cultural and political circumstances (e.g. rising unemployment or the feeling of being under threat in matters related to culture) lead them to turn to the radical right.²² It seems that we can divide the issues into economic factors (related to economic anxiety and insecurity) and cultural factors (related to immigration and cultural issues).

The effects of globalisation and modernisation have caused economic anxiety for many and a strong division between the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of these developments.²³ parties that capitalise on public dissatisfaction, RRPs appeal to those who are suffering due to changing circumstances, and who direct their frustration at the political elite for its inability to address their grievances at the national and EU levels. This particular demographic consists of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds who have experienced a loss of status as a result of the general effects of globalisation, such as austerity policies, the rise of the knowledge economy, reduced economic protection and increased income inequality. However, scholarship regarding a direct link between economic anxiety and demand for RRPs is mixed,²⁴ with some finding strong evidence for such a link and others finding none.²⁵ For instance, a country’s high aggregate unemployment rate does not lead to a higher chance of people voting for an RRP instead of one of the mainstream parties.²⁶ On the other hand, personal perception of an economic threat results in stronger anti-immigrant sentiments,²⁷ and substantial immigration rates tend to amplify the RRP vote.²⁸ However, related to these

²² Rydgren, ‘The Sociology of the Radical Right’, 247.

²³ H. Kriesi et al., *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²⁴ R. F. Inglehart and P. Norris, ‘Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash’, SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, 29 July 2016), 26–7; Arzheimer, ‘Explaining Electoral Support for the Radical Right’, 156.

²⁵ F. Mols and J. Jetten, *The Wealth Paradox: Economic Prosperity and the Hardening of Attitudes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁶ K. Arzheimer and E. Carter, ‘Political Opportunity Structures and Right-Wing Extremist Party Success’, *European Journal of Political Research* 45/3 (2006), 434–5.

²⁷ J. Sides and J. Citrin, ‘European Opinion About Immigration: The Role of Identities, Interests and Information’, *British Journal of Political Science* 37/3 (2007), 489–91.

²⁸ M. Golder, ‘Explaining Variation in the Success of Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe’, *Comparative Political Studies* 36/4 (2003), 451–2.



arguments is another feature of RRPs that is widely acknowledged: their ability to attract a large portion of voters who formerly supported left-wing parties. They achieve this by combining demands for welfare provisions with the condition that such benefits should only be accessible to native citizens—a policy that has been labelled ‘welfare chauvinism’.²⁹

The second primary set of demand-side explanations views the rise of the radical right as a response to the social and cultural transformations that have been taking place in Europe since the late 1960s. In a seminal article from the early 1990s, Piero Ignazi contended that the growing popularity of RRPs was a consequence of a ‘silent counter-revolution’ that signalled a fundamental rejection of post-materialism by many parts of society. This phenomenon resulted in an increase in radicalisation and polarisation, accompanied by the emergence of issues that mainstream political parties failed to address, ultimately contributing to the ascent of RRPs.³⁰ More recently Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart coined the term ‘cultural backlash’ to address similar themes. The basis of their thesis is that a new, highly polarising divide has emerged in society, based on cultural exclusion. On one side is a younger, better-educated, more affluent group of mostly urban inhabitants who understand and support progressive values (including tolerance and support for various minorities), while on the other side are older, less-educated, typically male individuals who do not understand the changes occurring and feel threatened and insecure. Because those in this latter group used to be a majority but have become a minority and because they maintain their traditional values, ‘they have come to feel like strangers in their own land’.³¹ The authors have confirmed this thesis in empirical research that allowed them to construct a profile of the typical radical-right voter, with an important caveat that younger generations are far less likely to participate in elections and hence are under-represented, whereas older generations are not only much more traditional but also significantly more likely to turn out to vote. Further driving the vote for the radical right is the acceptance of authoritarian values and resentment towards political institutions. Interestingly, however, younger, less traditional generations are more susceptible to the sway of parties with anti-establishment appeal.³² Taking into account data from 10 Western European countries, it has been argued

²⁹ R. Careja and E. Harris, ‘Thirty Years of Welfare Chauvinism Research: Findings and Challenges’, *Journal of European Social Policy* 32/2 (2022), 212; J. G. Andersen and T. Bjørklund, ‘Structural Changes and New Cleavages: The Progress Parties in Denmark and Norway’, *Acta Sociologica* 33/3 (1990).

³⁰ P. Ignazi, ‘The Silent Counter-Revolution’, *European Journal of Political Research* 22/1 (1992).

³¹ P. Norris and R. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 91.

³² *Ibid.*, chap. 8.



that, unlike in the past, radical-right supporters are ideologically diverse, with 45% of them labelled as ‘sexually modern nativists’, merging anti-immigrant with pro-LGBTQ+ attitudes.³³

A plethora of studies have determined that among the issues that create the strongest demand for RRP, anti-immigrant attitudes play the most pivotal role in driving voter preference.³⁴ These attitudes can vary in intensity, some driven by racism or xenophobia and others by discontent with immigration policy. It should be noted that this issue encompasses both incoming migrants and refugees and the migrant populations already residing in a country. However, a person who holds anti-immigrant views will not necessarily vote for an RRP. Nevertheless, in the rhetoric of these parties, immigrants are often portrayed as jeopardising the homogeneity of the nation and working against the doctrine of ethno-pluralism. Moreover, they are blamed for contributing to high unemployment rates and crime and for misusing social benefits, leading to a lack of funds for those who genuinely need help. And while the appeal of the radical right extends beyond its anti-immigrant stance, making RRP more than just single-issue parties, its nativist foundations remain crucial.³⁵ In general, although economic and cultural considerations are important for understanding the demand for RRP, the key challenge is to combine them into a comprehensive explanation.

Supply-side explanations

The explanations on the supply side focus primarily on RRP and their efforts to boost their electoral support. Rydgren categorises them into three groups: the ideology and discourse of RRP (described above), political opportunity structures and the organisation of RRP.³⁶

The category of political opportunity structure relates primarily to changes in party politics at the structural and institutional levels and refers to the opportunities and constraints that aspiring political entrepreneurs encounter. Several enduring patterns are responsible for changes in European party politics. Over the past

³³ C. M. Lancaster, ‘Not So Radical After All: Ideological Diversity Among Radical Right Supporters and Its Implications’, *Political Studies* 68/3 (2020), 608.

³⁴ E. Ivarsflaten, ‘What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-Examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases’, *Comparative Political Studies* 41/1 (2008), 14–15; P. Norris, *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chap. 8.

³⁵ C. Mudde, ‘The Single-Issue Party Thesis: Extreme Right Parties and the Immigration Issue’, *West European Politics* 22/3 (1999).

³⁶ Rydgren, ‘The Sociology of the Radical Right’, 252.



few decades, the socio-cultural cleavage has become more prominent in political competition, overshadowing the socio-economic divide. When combined with the greater salience of and polarisation in identity politics, the socio-cultural division creates an ideal environment for RRPs. Likewise, some argue that the radical right benefits from the political convergence of mainstream parties, making it easier for RRPs to express their contrasting stance and attract voters who harbour resentment towards the mainstream.³⁷ But as is often the case in this field, the evidence is mixed. While some assert that the mainstream parties' political convergence benefits the radical right,³⁸ others find no such effect.³⁹ Examining the effects of policy positioning by the radical right's main mainstream competitor yields mixed results, too. For instance, while some authors have concluded that when the largest mainstream competitor adopts a centrist stance, that position increases the probability of people voting for an RRP,⁴⁰ others have arrived at the opposite view.⁴¹ Finally, the radical right benefits from the long-standing trends of people's loss of identification with mainstream parties, rising electoral volatility in several European states and the end of class voting (dealignment).

The nature of the electoral system (i.e. proportional versus majoritarian) and electoral thresholds and their impact on the RRP vote have also been investigated in the category of political opportunity structures, but conclusions have been mixed.⁴² The impact of the media on the rise of RRPs has not been adequately explored. However, some authors have contended that RRPs benefit from media attention not only when they present their views⁴³ but also when the media covers topics such as crime and immigration, which voters associate with the radical right.⁴⁴ The visibility and media presence of RRP leaders are affected by the same

³⁷ H. Kitschelt and A. J. McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 53–6.

³⁸ D. Spies and S. T. Franzmann, 'A Two-Dimensional Approach to the Political Opportunity Structure of Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe', *West European Politics* 34/5 (2011), 1057–8; E. Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure?* (Manchester University Press, 2005), chap. 4.

³⁹ Norris, *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market*, chap. 9.

⁴⁰ W. van der Brug, M. Fennema and J. Tillie, 'Why Some Anti-Immigrant Parties Fail and Others Succeed: A Two-Step Model of Aggregate Electoral Support', *Comparative Political Studies* 38/5 (2005), 561.

⁴¹ K. Arzheimer and E. Carter, 'Political Opportunity Structures and Right-Wing Extremist Party Success', 439.

⁴² M. Golder, 'Far Right Parties in Europe', *Annual Review of Political Science* 19/1 (2016), 486.

⁴³ H. G. Boomgaarden and R. Vliegenthart, 'Explaining the Rise of Anti-Immigrant Parties: The Role of News Media Content', *Electoral Studies* 26/2 (2007), 412.

⁴⁴ S. Walgrave and K. De Swert, 'The Making of the (Issues of the) Vlaams Blok', *Political Communication* 21/4 (2004).



mechanisms.⁴⁵ Another factor of some importance is that, given that the mainstream media are sometimes hostile towards them, RRP benefit from the rising use of social media to directly mobilise their supporters without any intermediaries.⁴⁶

Despite the importance of organisation for RRP's political success, there have been limited studies of their party structure. Nevertheless, due to their sometimes high internal fractionalisation and a strong reliance on the leader, leading to their depiction as personal parties, scholars have emphasised the importance of a strong party organisation not only to enable such a party to achieve success but, particularly, to guarantee party longevity after an initial breakthrough.⁴⁷ Frequently, RRP achieve electoral success primarily through media coverage, with limited reliance on party organisation.⁴⁸ With regard to members and activists, David Art found notable variations in the quality and quantity of membership in different radical parties. In addition to considering the contextual and historical factors specific to each country, Art emphasises the reception of the parties in public opinion, especially in terms of whether they are isolated by the cordon sanitaire. If so, then only extremists or those with nothing to lose are willing to join these movements.⁴⁹

In essence, by combining populism and nativism, RRP's fundamental strategy is to cleverly exploit the existing opportunity structure to elevate the salience of certain socio-cultural issues, rather than to engage in a socio-economic conflict in which they lack confidence. For example, they focus on immigration, crime and security to cultivate the perception among voters that these matters align with the radical right's agenda. If the salience of such issues increases due to socio-cultural developments, the parties' success is more likely. Conversely, if socio-economic issues dominate, voters tend to gravitate towards established parties with expertise in this field. However, this overall pattern always needs to be adapted to the context of the time and space in which an individual RRP operates.

⁴⁵ R. Vliegthart, H. G. Boomgaarden and J. Van Spanje, 'Anti-Immigrant Party Support and Media Visibility: A Cross-Party, Over-Time Perspective', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 22/3 (2012), 315–58; L. Bos, W. van der Brug, and C. de Vreese, 'Media Coverage of Right-Wing Populist Leaders', *Communications* 35/2 (2010).

⁴⁶ A. A. Ellinas, 'Media and the Radical Right', in J. Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴⁷ Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, 65.

⁴⁸ A. A. Ellinas, 'Chaotic but Popular? Extreme-Right Organisation and Performance in the Age of Media Communication', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17/2 (2009).

⁴⁹ D. Art, *Inside the Radical Right: The Development of Anti-Immigrant Parties in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 23.



Consequences of the rise of RRPs

Considering the extensive history and significance of RRPs in European politics, it is reasonable to expect that some analysis has been done of the implications of their actions. Scholarship commonly differentiates between direct consequences, such as influence on policymaking, and indirect consequences, such as impact on other actors and processes.⁵⁰ Authors have been primarily interested in the success of RRPs in impacting political and public opinion on their core issue of immigration. The following section summarises the literature addressing this issue. However, building upon the argument above, which emphasises the importance of examining the consequences of RRPs in relation to mainstream parties, most of the space below is dedicated to addressing this topic, with references to theoretical discussions in the literature.

The effects of RRPs on policymaking

Due to the anti-immigrant attitudes of the radical right, scholars have focused primarily on whether RRPs' proposals in this area have been put into action. This approach originally revolved around the influence of the rise of the radical right on the attitudes of other parties, particularly the centre–right. Some scholars believe the centre–right's shift on immigration, in which it adopted more stringent policies, was influenced by competition with RRPs,⁵¹ while others argue that it happened independently, before the rise of the radical right.⁵² As far as policy output is concerned, the presence of RRPs in centre–right coalition governments had no direct impact on their immigration policies. Although these governments implemented more stringent immigration policies than the centre–left, the outcome was quite similar when the centre–right was in power without the presence of RRPs.⁵³ However, some authors claim that there is a significant impact on integration policy from the

⁵⁰ P. Lutz, 'Variation in Policy Success: Radical Right Populism and Migration Policy', *West European Politics* 42/3 (2019), 519–20.

⁵¹ M. H. Williams, *The Impact of Radical Right-Wing Parties in West European Democracies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), chap. 4; T. Abou-Chadi and W. Krause, 'The Causal Effect of Radical Right Success on Mainstream Parties' Policy Positions: A Regression Discontinuity Approach', *British Journal of Political Science* 50/3 (2020), 839.

⁵² T. Bale, 'Turning Round the Telescope. Centre–Right Parties and Immigration and Integration Policy in Europe', *Journal of European Public Policy* 15/3 (2008).

⁵³ T. Akkerman, 'Comparing Radical Right Parties in Government: Immigration and Integration Policies in Nine Countries (1996–2010)', *West European Politics* 35/3 (2012), 520.



presence of RRPs in government. As Lutz argued, ‘anti-immigrant mobilisation is more likely to influence immigrants’ rights than their actual numbers.’⁵⁴ Based on the analysis of 30 European countries from 1989 to 2018, other authors also confirmed that when it came to civil liberties and other policy spheres, the impact of RRPs as junior coalition partners was instrumental in diminishing freedom of speech, freedom of religion, access to justice and social equality.⁵⁵

The impact on mainstream parties

It is common knowledge in political science that parties react both to changes in public opinion and to the actions of their competitors. These reactions can span from deciding to ignore certain parties, to rejecting the possibility of cooperation and finally to adopting their position in specific areas. What strategies can be identified based on the literature?

Before presenting these strategies, it is important to make some introductory points. First, in the past three decades, both the major left-wing and right-wing parties have shifted towards the right side of the political spectrum, specifically on issues such as immigration and integration.⁵⁶ The result is that typically rightist issues are high on the political agenda. This is likely to benefit the centre–right more than the centre–left because it means that the natural concerns of the centre–right parties and their voters are in the spotlight. Second, in considering how close certain mainstream parties are to the radical right, we must consider both policy content and policy style. Those parties that are closest to one another programmatically might compete for the same part of the electorate, which might lead to arguments that the radical right is the biggest threat to the mainstream centre–right parties.⁵⁷ But because the Christian Democrats and conservatives are relatively close to RRPs in many of their positions, it is easier for them to adopt RRP policies than for those who are quite distant programmatically.⁵⁸ A complex chain of interlinkages between mainstream and radical parties is evident.

⁵⁴ Lutz, ‘Variation in Policy Success’, 517.

⁵⁵ N. Bichay, ‘Populist Radical-Right Junior Coalition Partners and Liberal Democracy in Europe’, *Party Politics* 30/2 (2024), 244.

⁵⁶ M. Wagner and T. M. Meyer, ‘The Radical Right as Niche Parties? The Ideological Landscape of Party Systems in Western Europe, 1980–2014’, *Political Studies* 65/1 (2017), 91.

⁵⁷ J. van Spanje, ‘Contagious Parties: Anti-Immigration Parties and Their Impact on Other Parties’ Immigration Stances in Contemporary Western Europe’, *Party Politics* 16/5 (2010), 567.

⁵⁸ K. van Kersbergen and A. Krouwel, ‘A Double-Edged Sword! The Dutch Centre-Right and the “Foreigners Issue”’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 15/3 (2008).



Let us start with the radical right. As a political entrepreneur, its basic options are either to fill a vacant electoral space or to establish a new one, positioning its representatives strongly in opposition to their competitors. In both scenarios the goal is to foster a deep division, frequently employing fear-inducing language to cultivate apprehension and a perception of imminent danger among voters. If a particular issue, such as one relating to potential danger, is successfully put on the agenda, it requires an answer from the mainstream parties.⁵⁹

The positions of the mainstream parties in relation to those of the RRP's determine which of three ways these parties might respond to the radical right, reflecting different theoretical models.⁶⁰ One way is for the mainstream party to ignore the imminent danger and stay focused on the party platform. This option, sometimes referred to as a dismissive strategy, becomes more effective for parties that are ideologically distant from the entrepreneur, as they are less likely to fight for the same part of the electorate as the proximate parties. Although this approach can demonstrate the mainstream party's principled commitment and maintain voter loyalty, it could leave the party vulnerable if the political agenda shifts further to the topics favoured by the radical right.⁶¹ The second approach is for the mainstream party to shift its position and emulate that of its radical competitor to attract the latter's voting base, which is referred to as an accommodative strategy. In such a case, the party risks losing credibility due to this drastic programmatic shift and, as a result, internal conflicts may arise. Furthermore, the electorate may be dissatisfied with the programmatic changes and opt to support a different political party. Third, the party can pick up the gauntlet and distance itself from the radical right, which is called an adversarial strategy. Each of the three options has its advantages and disadvantages, and sometimes parties adopt a combination of two or all three of these options. However, there is yet another possibility in the repertoire of actions. The mainstream party can attempt to avoid a direct confrontation with the radical right by diffusing or depoliticising the concerns raised by the RRP's involved and instead emphasising the importance of the issues that the mainstream party prioritises. This category of responses pertains to mainstream parties that strategically decide to reach a consensus, depoliticise specific matters and try to reset the political agenda. The risk is that this will fuel the populist rhetoric of the radical right, which might portray the situation as a collusion between the elites against the 'pure people'. In summation, all these

⁵⁹ Mols and Jetten, 'Understanding Support for Populist Radical Right Parties', 7.

⁶⁰ B. M. Meguid, 'Competition Between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success', *American Political Science Review* 99/3 (2005).

⁶¹ T. Bale et al., 'If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them? Explaining Social Democratic Responses to the Challenge From the Populist Radical Right in Western Europe', *Political Studies* 58/3 (2010), 412–13.



strategies encompass more than just party positions, as they also include the competition for issue ownership and the preferred level of salience attributed to specific issues.

Are these strategies impacting the fate of RRP? At the level of party programmes, studies have confirmed the effects of the accommodative strategy.⁶² Namely, both the centre–left and the centre–right have shifted their attitudes on immigration and integration in response to the challenge from the radicals. Similarly, the strategies of mainstream parties have had a significant impact on the RRP vote.⁶³ However, we must shift our focus from the aggregate level to the level of the individual. Is it reasonable to expect that voters on the radical right will defect to mainstream parties if these parties switch their preferences on immigration to those favoured by RRP? Responding to this question is challenging due to the nature of the data used in the literature, which make it difficult to prove such a mechanism causally. However, a recent study shows that radical-right voters are no more volatile than others.⁶⁴ At the same time, they are convinced that the mainstream parties will not address issues that are important to them. Thus, even if mainstream parties change their policies, radical-right voters may still doubt these parties' sincerity, and it may take quite a while for these voters to become aware of the parties' change.⁶⁵ According to a recent experimental case study in Germany, when exposed to a counterfactual scenario in which mainstream parties adopt a more restrictive policy stance on immigration, up to 50% of Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) voters were open to switching their vote to mainstream alternatives. However, the key point to note is that this strategy carries significant risks. In this experiment, policy accommodation caused a greater number of voters to abandon mainstream parties than to follow them. More research is needed to confirm these mechanisms in different contexts.⁶⁶

On another level the relationship between the mainstream and radical parties can be examined by investigating the consequences of collaboration or lack thereof between them. On the one hand, by collaborating, the mainstream right might legitimise (normalise) in the eyes of the electorate the radical right and

⁶² Abou-Chadi and Krause, 'The Causal Effect of Radical Right Success on Mainstream Parties' Policy Positions', 838–40.

⁶³ Meguid, 'Competition Between Unequals', 354.

⁶⁴ R. Voogd and R. Dassonneville, 'Are the Supporters of Populist Parties Loyal Voters? Dissatisfaction and Stable Voting for Populist Parties', *Government and Opposition* 55/3 (2020), 358–62.

⁶⁵ H. Kitschelt, 'Party Systems and Radical Right-Wing Parties', in J. Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, 173.

⁶⁶ W. Chou et al., 'Competing for Loyalists? How Party Positioning Affects Populist Radical Right Voting', *Comparative Political Studies* 54/12 (2021).



the issues it raises. But including radical-right members in office is grounded in the mainstream parties' wish to have a moderating effect on the radical right. One view is that their radical nature can be tempered by their full participation in democratic life, including being involved in the government.⁶⁷ However, from the perspective of the radical right, collaboration with the mainstream right might reduce the appeal of an RRP as an anti-establishment party and might lead to electoral losses. Also, an RRP is often not alone in its views and must consider its strategies in relation to the presence or potential emergence of another RRP.

By implementing a cordon sanitaire and refusing to cooperate with the radical right as a matter of principle, mainstream parties can keep RRP out of the government in the short term.⁶⁸ However, to achieve this, they typically have to build a broad and diverse governing coalition that may lack internal unity. On the other hand, establishing a coalition with the radical party could potentially offer some advantages, such as increasing coalition cohesion, especially when the RRP and the centre-right are close to each other on many programmatic points.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the mainstream right could be driven by the assumption that by extending an invitation into government to the radical right, they will be able to neutralise the radical right's influence in the foreseeable future.

In what ways do these potential responses influence RRP? As previously stated, although mainstream parties have moved towards the right over the past four decades, RRP have not remained stagnant; indeed, they instead have become even more extreme. Today, they are more distant from other parties than in the past.⁷⁰ This assertion is supported by a finding in the literature that indicates that being involved in government has only a limited moderating impact on the radical right.⁷¹ On the other hand, the cordon sanitaire has not been successful, either. Scholars argue that the ostracised parties did not change as far as their radicalisation is concerned. Conversely, a body of evidence shows mixed results concerning whether non-ostracised parties tend to adopt more moderate positions

⁶⁷ S. Berman, 'Taming Extremist Parties: Lessons From Europe', *Journal of Democracy* 19 (2008), 5–6.

⁶⁸ J. van Spanje and W. van der Brug, 'The Party as Pariah: The Exclusion of Anti-Immigration Parties and Its Effect on Their Ideological Positions', *West European Politics* 30/5 (2007).

⁶⁹ S. L. de Lange, 'New Alliances: Why Mainstream Parties Govern with Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties', *Political Studies* 60/4 (2012), 907.

⁷⁰ T. Immerzeel, M. Lubbers and H. Coffé, 'Competing With the Radical Right', 828–30.

⁷¹ M. Minkenberg, 'From Pariah to Policy-Maker? The Radical Right in Europe, West and East: Between Margin and Mainstream', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 21/1 (2013), 17–20.



as time progresses.⁷² However, once RRP enter parliament, support for them becomes normalised, making it socially acceptable to declare membership of or sympathy for the party.⁷³

Conclusions and recommendations

This policy brief has reviewed a large body of literature devoted to RRP in Europe. Today, the discussion has moved beyond the long debates about definitional issues that took precedence until the 2010s, and there is a relatively high consensus about the core elements of the ideology of the radical right. There is much less agreement and many mixed results when it comes to demand- and supply-side explanations for the rise of RRP. Public grievances are seen by scholars as a contextual backdrop but not one that is self-sufficient. To make an issue stand out and signal a position opposite to that of other parties, an RRP must use this backdrop creatively. Therefore, the objective of the research has been to test the extent to which RRP strategies and other activities are successful and, in particular, whether they have had an effect on voters, policies and other parties. To have an effect, it is assumed that parties must learn not only how to read public perceptions but also how to shape them.

The empirical results found in this body of literature allow us to gain significant insight into the demographic of RRP voters, their reasons for supporting the party, and the underlying economic, cultural and other influences that shape this support. Furthermore, it is important to note that the decision to vote for an RRP is not irrational but rather based on a combination of ideological and pragmatic considerations. In terms of the big picture, our knowledge of why people support RRP is extensive on the demand side but limited on the supply side and even more so on the combination of both perspectives. Combining the two into a coherent explanation is the main challenge identified by leading scholars in the field and has not yet been met. From another perspective an additional drawback of the existing research is that the field continues to be largely centred around

⁷² van Spanje and van der Brug, 'The Party as Pariah', 1036; T. Akkerman and M. Rooduijn, 'Pariahs or Partners? Inclusion and Exclusion of Radical Right Parties and the Effects on Their Policy Positions', *Political Studies* 63/5 (2015), 1150.

⁷³ V. Valentim, 'Parliamentary Representation and the Normalization of Radical Right Support', *Comparative Political Studies* 54/14 (2021), 2503.



the examination of Western Europe, neglecting the East. Finally, when it comes to disciplinary boundaries, political scientists focus primarily on political parties, using sources such as public opinion data, party manifestos and expert surveys. In contrast, sociologists view the radical right as a social movement, frequently analysing street protests. Synthesising these different bodies of literature is a major challenge.

Policymakers, party strategists and communication officers from the centrist political movements need to consider the implications of these findings for the future of their parties. The main recommendations can be summarised as follows:

1. Acknowledge the shifting political climate in Europe, preparing responses to the concerns stirred up by the radical right.
2. Carefully consider the implications of collaborating or not collaborating with the radical right, especially when it comes to the legitimacy of their ideologies.
3. Foresee how the radical right might respond, particularly concerning the radicalisation or mainstreaming of their positions and political strategies.
4. Take into account the potential impacts on the cohesiveness of the mainstream party involved and on its capacity to form coalitions in the future.

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