



## Psychological bases of support for radical right parties



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### ABSTRACT

We examine the social–psychological and personality bases of support for radical right parties (RRPs), using cognitive–motivational approaches of ideology. Our comprehensive model includes core ideological variables which mediate personality traits (Big Five) or how individuals engage in social relationships and accommodate novel stimuli. Structural equation models were tested in an Austrian population sample to examine support for a RRP, the FPÖ. Our results suggest that a “perceived immigrant threat” and, in part, social dominance orientation are directly related to RRP support, whereas right-wing authoritarianism has consistent indirect (mediated) impact. Associations with lower Openness to Experience, lower Agreeableness, and to some extent also with Conscientiousness are mediated by the ideological variables. The conclusion discusses how RRP’s success and communication strategies can be linked to basic psychological motivations.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, Europe has witnessed growing electoral success of radical right parties (RRPs). As a “party family” RRP are commonly characterized by their authoritarian beliefs, the return to traditional values, anti-immigrant and xenophobic stances, i.e., preference for an ethnically homogeneous population, as well as in-group/out-group thinking that portrays the existence of threats (e.g. Rydgren, 2007). Hence, the focus on grievances concerning immigration is considered a core feature of the RRP profile (Ennser, 2012; Ivarsflaten, 2008).

Meanwhile, empirical research has tried to explain why voters support RRP (see Van der Brug & Fennema, 2007). In terms of the social structure, RRP support was found to be more prevalent among less educated, lower-income, and younger voters (e.g. Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Oesch, 2008; Rydgren, 2007). With regard to policies, preferences on “new” issues, such as anti-immigration policies or EU-skepticism, are known to attract many RRP voters (e.g. Aichholzer, Kritzinger, Wagner, & Zeglovits, 2014; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Van der Brug & Fennema, 2007).

Yet, the evidence concerning the role of core ideological dimensions, such as “egalitarian” or “authoritarian” attitudes, is contradictory (see Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2015; Dunn, 2015; Zandonella & Zeglovits, 2012).

In addition, despite a large body of literature on basic personality traits as a factor in partisan orientation, few studies have attempted to link psychological traits (e.g. Big Five) to preference for RRP (Zandonella & Zeglovits, 2012), extreme right-wing parties (Schoen & Schumann, 2007) or populist parties more generally (Bakker, Rooduijn, & Schumacher, in press). Furthermore, a coherent theoretical framework that links social–psychological factors of ideology and personality to core RRP stances is largely missing in the literature.

In the present study, we anticipate that voters gravitate toward RRP when they: (a) exhibit authoritarian attitudes (*right-wing authoritarianism*, RWA), i.e., motivational goals to seek group security and stability in societal order (Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt, 1989); (b) exhibit competitively driven motivations to maintain hierarchical or superior–inferior relations between social groups (*social dominance orientation*, SDO) (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994); and (c) perceive *social threats to identity and cohesion induced by immigration* and, hence, exhibit motivations to reduce that uncertainty and threat (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Finally, we propose that (d) these attitudinal factors fully mediate basic personality traits (Big Five) that might predispose individuals to uphold stability in social relationships or make them less open to new social situations or stimuli (see DeYoung, Peterson, & Higgins, 2002).

After specifying our hypotheses, we analyze our theoretical model by using unique representative survey data from Austria. Our outcome variable is preferences for the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*), FPÖ, one of the most successful RRP in Europe.

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## 2. Radical right party support: its social–psychological and personality bases

### 2.1. Radical right party support and its relation to RWA and SDO

It is well established that basic cognitive–motivational goals drive our ideological orientations, namely advocating vs. resisting social change and rejecting vs. accepting inequality or RWA and SDO, respectively (see Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009, for an overview). Consistent with this framework, RWA and SDO are also believed to play a role in satisfying epistemic and existential motivations, namely reducing uncertainty and threat (Jost et al., 2003).

Following Altemeyer (1981), the main perceptual and behavioral consequences (or lower-level structure) of RWA are: (1) to accept and to adhere to authorities as well as to social norms (“submission”); (2) to approve of and demand the punishment of people who deny the legitimacy of these authorities or deviate from these norms (“aggression”); and (3) to be sensitive to threats to a given social order (“conventionalism”). We thus anticipate that motivational goals of RWA foster RRP support as these are vital characteristics of RRP stances.

In turn, SDO expresses competitively driven motivations to maintain or establish group dominance and superiority, i.e., people high on SDO support intergroup hierarchies and tend to arrange social groups in a superior–inferior order. Thus, SDO should predict a person’s acceptance or rejection of ideologies and policies relevant to group relations (Pratto et al., 1994). We therefore expect SDO to be positively related to RRP preference.

Even though RWA and SDO can be moderately to strongly positively correlated (Roccatò & Ricolfi, 2005), these factors represent distinct predictors of numerous sociopolitical and intergroup attitudes, especially political orientation and forms of prejudice (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). However, previous evidence suggests that SDO, rather than RWA, might be more important for party preferences or more directly related to them (Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2015).

### 2.2. Radical right party support and perceived immigrant threat

To explain RRP support, we further consider a “perceived immigrant threat” (PIT), i.e., individuals’ perception that immigration threatens their personal or the majority’s societal value system, culture, social cohesion, or alleged ethnic homogeneity. Indeed, other authors have referred to this tendency as “cultural conflict” dimension (Kriesi et al., 2008), a “normative threat” (Stenner, 2009), or “symbolic threat” (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Previous research suggests that this type of threat seems to matter most for RRP support (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Oesch, 2008), even more so than economic or “material threats” (on this distinction see Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Stephan & Stephan, 2000), or that these types of threat by immigrants are not empirically distinguishable (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012). According to a core component of RRP’s discourse, their supporters seek to mitigate perceived threats linked to immigration (PIT).

### 2.3. RWA, SDO, and social threat

In a nutshell, Duckitt and Sibley’s (2009) model suggests that scoring high in RWA makes individuals more sensitive or responsive to types of social threat. Indeed, research has shown that authoritarians are more responsive to threatening messages (e.g. Lavine et al., 1999) or that (extreme) right-wing individuals show stronger psychological, but also physiological responses, to negative or threatening stimuli (e.g. Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014). We thus anticipate that RWA is an important antecedent of PIT.

Another main hypothesis in Duckitt and Sibley’s (2009) theoretical approach is that the relationship between RWA and political behavior (e.g. party preference) is, at least partly if not fully, mediated by perceived threats (i.e., PIT). As a consequence, RWA would only have an

indirect effect on RRP support. SDO, on the other hand, is expected to be connected less strongly, if at all, to societal-level threats or normative threats (Onraet, Van Hiel, Dhont, & Pattyn, 2013). Instead, it will be related to threats explicitly activating competitiveness over relative superiority and dominance of groups. We nevertheless test, but do not expect mediation of SDO on voting preference via PIT.

### 2.4. Radical right party support and its linkage to personality

The literature on partisan orientation and individuals’ personality mainly builds on the Big Five model. Based on the extant literature, we anticipate that RRP support is mainly predicted by lower scores on *Openness to Experience* (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 1999; Chirumbolo & Leone, 2010; Vecchione et al., 2011), higher levels of *Conscientiousness* (Chirumbolo & Leone, 2010; Schoen & Schumann, 2007; though with mixed findings: Vecchione et al., 2011; Zandonella & Zeglovits, 2012), and lower scores on *Agreeableness* (i.e., lower trust, altruism or compliance) (Bakker et al., in press; Chirumbolo & Leone, 2010; Schoen & Schumann, 2007; Zandonella & Zeglovits, 2012). Furthermore, preliminary evidence suggests that people low in *Emotional Stability* might prefer RRP over other parties (Schoen & Schumann, 2007; Zandonella & Zeglovits, 2012), whereas *Extraversion* seems to play a negligible role in voters’ behavior (see Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2011; Schoen & Schumann, 2007; Zandonella & Zeglovits, 2012).

### 2.5. Mediation of personality traits by ideological attitudes

Relationships between personality and political preferences are likely not to be direct, but rather indirect or mediated by ideological variables. In particular, RWA is assumed to have a unique foundation in personality, including social conformity traits or a combination of *Conscientiousness* and lower *Openness to Experience* (e.g. Brown, 1965; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009). In turn, *Emotional Stability* should be negatively related to feelings of threat and insecurity and could thus diminish RWA. SDO seems to be primarily related to lower *Agreeableness* (or lower trust, altruism, or compliance), higher *Conscientiousness*, and lower *Openness to Experience* (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). PIT or prejudice might be rooted in traits that make people less capable of adapting to new stimuli and social situations, traits that entail lower levels of altruism or tolerance in social relationships, or traits that make them more anxious (see Brown, 1965). We anticipate that *Openness to Experience*, *Agreeableness*, and *Emotional Stability* are negatively associated with PIT, while *Conscientiousness* is positively associated with PIT (e.g. Gallego & Pardos-Prado, 2014; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008).

Table 1 and Fig. 1 provide a summary of our hypotheses and the underlying model for our empirical analyses.

**Table 1**  
Hypothesized relationship of variables.

		Dependent variables			
		RWA	SDO	PIT	RRP support
Social–psychological factors	PIT				+
	RWA		+	+	(+)
	SDO	+		○	+
Personality (Big Five)	Conscientiousness	+	+	+	(+)
	Openness to experience	–	–	–	(–)
	Agreeableness	○	–	–	(–)
	Emotional stability	–	○	–	(–)
	Extraversion	○	○	○	(○)

Note: RWA = right-wing authoritarianism, SDO = social dominance orientation, PIT = Perceived immigrant threat, RRP = radical right party, “○” = no expectation, “( )” = indirect effect/mediation expected.

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