



Winning the ‘losers’ but losing the ‘winners’? The electoral consequences of the radical right moving to the economic left



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ABSTRACT

Voters with lower socio-economic status are now consistently overrepresented among the radical right electorate. According to the ‘new winning formula’, many radical right parties increasingly move to the left on socio-economic issues to cater to these voters. This study tests a crucial assumption underlying this formula: whether radical right parties with socio-economically left-leaning positions actually attract more working class voters. By mapping class characteristics of the electorate of 10 radical right parties at three time points (based on surveys) against these parties’ positions on the economic dimension (according to experts), this study shows that the ‘class gap’ – the extent to which class indicators predict voters’ propensity to vote for the radical right – is significantly larger for socio-economically leftwing parties.

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1. Introduction

In spite of the alleged decline of class-based voting (Clark and Lipset, 2001), a link still exists between citizens’ socio-economic positions and their vote choice. This is no less so for radical right parties, among whose electorates blue collar workers and the lower educated are consistently overrepresented (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Lubbers et al., 2002; Ivarsflaten, 2005; Oesch, 2008; Rydgren, 2012). Several reasons have been put forward for the radical right’s success among voters with lower socio-economic status. Among these is the assertion that these voters are ‘losers of globalization’ (Kriesi et al., 2008): they have most to fear of economic competition, cultural diversity, and supranational political integration, and are therefore particularly likely to support parties that seek to reverse trends towards further economic, political and cultural globalization (Oesch, 2012). At the same time, the radical right’s electoral dependence on the working class is by no means universal: some parties have a stronger overrepresentation of working class voters than others (Van der Brug et al., 2012).

The ‘proletarianization’ (Betz, 1994) of the support base of radical right parties has been linked to their ideological development. It has been repeatedly argued that, while often originating as anti-tax parties, many radical right parties have moved to the center (or to the left of that) on economic issues to cater to its electoral base among the working class, or in an attempt to increase

it (Kitschelt, 2004). After all, a sizeable ‘working class authoritarian’ electorate (Lipset, 1959; Lefkofridi et al., 2013; Svallfors, 2005) combines economically left-wing and culturally conservative attitudes. Although a large part of the electorate holds such attitudes, their opinions are generally ill-represented by parties (Lachat and Dolezal, 2008; Van Der Brug and van Spanje, 2009). It would therefore be advantageous for radical right parties to move to the economic left. As a result, a pro-welfare nativist stance has been described as the Radical right’s ‘new winning formula’ (Kitschelt, 2004; De Lange, 2007).

However, no study has to date systematically investigated the core of this assumption: have economically centrist or center-left radical right parties a more clearly ‘proletarianized’ electorate than radical right parties that are more economically liberal? While support for this thesis has been put forward in analyses of individual countries, such as France (Mayer, 2012), no study exists that investigates this assertion on a broader scale. This article aims to fill this void. I test whether the economic position of radical right parties – which ranges from pro-redistributionist ‘welfare chauvinism’ (Goul Andersen, 1992) to anti-statist neoliberalism (see Mudde, 2007) – is empirically associated to electoral success among voters working in precarious jobs and sectors, as well as those with little education. After all, if voters turn out to be indifferent to the radical right’s stance on economic issues, it cannot be part of a ‘winning formula’.

I investigate this question by mapping the class background of 10 West-European radical right parties at three time points (based on surveys) against these parties’ positions on an economic left-

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right dimension (according to experts). Based on this analysis, I show that economically centrist or center-left radical right parties indeed attract significantly more voters with lower socio-economic backgrounds (such as sales and clerical personnel, semi- and unskilled workers, as well as voters with low levels of education). Importantly, the extent to which one's job predicts one's propensity to vote for the radical right is significantly larger for economically left-wing parties: pro-welfare radical right parties gain votes from a more specific part of the electorate, rather than relying on a broader class coalition, as their more liberal counterparts do. This is in line with a second finding: voters in precarious jobs and sectors, as well as the lower educated, are very likely to combine a preference for redistribution with opposition to immigration.

This has implications for the assertion that a 'pro-welfare nativist' position is the 'new winning formula' for the radical right. Indeed, the radical right can attract new voters by catering to the group of pro-redistribution nativist voters, who are strongly concentrated in working class jobs – the 'losers of globalization'. Rather than broadening its electoral scope, however, this means focusing it on an increasingly specific group, as it decreases electoral appeal among highly skilled and well-educated voters. This study therefore suggests that such a strategy might mean winning the 'losers' while losing the 'winners'.

2. Theory

The link between class and voting is complex. While often reduced to the specific phenomenon of workers voting for the left, *class-based voting* refers to any "systematic link between voters' class location and the parties they choose" (Oesch, 2012: 32). Likewise, a 'class vote' is not necessarily or only an expression of economic interests, but a generalization of occupational experiences – both material and cultural – to the sphere of politics. Given the importance of jobs and the workplace in many citizens' everyday lives, it is not unreasonable to assume experiences in the workplace to affect citizens' attitudes.

In the case of the radical right, a class-based vote would mean that certain economic roles are more likely than others to involve experiences that foster attitudes and that increase the likelihood of a radical right vote.¹ The attitudes relevant for radical right voting include nativism – in-group preferences (or nationalism) combined with out-group fear (or xenophobia) – and authoritarianism, mirroring these parties' ideology (Mudde, 2007). In this view, contrasting class voting to 'substantive' voting is somewhat of a false dichotomy, as class background and political attitudes occupy different stages in the 'funnel of causality'. However, adherents of the notion of class voting often implicitly suggest that economic indicators are the *most important* determinants of attitudes. This assertion is more controversial.

The social category most strongly overrepresented in the radical right electorate, apart from the smaller category of the *petite bourgeoisie*, consists of the lesser educated and blue collar workers (Ivarsflaten, 2005). It seems that these groups are increasingly present among the radical right's electorate. The case of France's *National Front* (FN) provides a striking example. In the 1980s, the largest groups voting for these parties were the Catholic, well-off bourgeoisie as well as small shopkeepers and artisans – groups over which the FN competed mainly with the

mainstream right (Mayer, 2012: 170). At the 1995 election, the largest group among the party's electorate consisted of skilled and unskilled workers, and rural and farmer voters followed in the 2000s (ibid). By now, France's *Socialist Party* experiences strong competition from the FN.

The electoral appeal of radical right parties among the lower social strata is generally recognized since Betz (1994) noted the 'proletarianization' of the radical right. Several explanations exist for this overrepresentation, categorized by Oesch (2008) under economic, cultural and political reasons for the working class to support the radical right. *Economic* conflict theories suggest that workers support the radical right in an attempt to "protect their jobs and wages from competition from labor migration and international trade" (ibid, 305). *Cultural* explanations assume that the cultural challenge posed by immigration is most strongly felt by the least educated classes, making them particularly opposed to multiculturalism. Theories of *political alienation*, finally, explain workers' anti-establishment vote for the radical right by the dissatisfaction with traditional (chiefly Social-Democratic) parties, trade unions, or the political system as a whole, all of which have allegedly shown to be incapable of defending their interests.

The notion of 'losers of (accelerating) globalization' (Kriesi et al., 2008; Bornschier and Kriesi, 2012) combines some of these explanations by describing a new social division that is the result of increasing competition in post-industrial societies. The radical right is supported by the group that finds itself at the wrong side of this cleavage, consisting of those suffering decline in either absolute (non-skilled workers) or relative (skilled workers) terms.

Although there is still much debate on the validity of the 'losers of globalization' thesis, there appears to be consensus that through one (or a combination) of the mechanisms described above, the working class is overrepresented in the electorate of radical right parties in most countries. As stated earlier, however, scholars disagree whether this makes class the most important predictor of radical right voters: some have argued that other variables – notably attitudes towards immigration – perform far better in predicting the radical right vote (Van der Brug et al., 2012). Still, the trend of 'proletarianization' seems to be ongoing, but not for all parties, and certainly not for all parties to the same extent. Below, I discuss how this process is linked to parties' ideology.

2.1. Socio-economic policies and radical right ideology

As noted by Mudde (2007: 123), the radical right party family (by now) "spreads a significant part of the whole dimension between the two poles of *laissez-faire* and state economy". Some radical right parties originally had – or were even uniquely founded for – a strong neoliberal position, in which anti-statist and populist arguments were used to criticize high taxes and large governments. Kitschelt argues that a combination of nationalist and neoliberal policies reflected the electoral opportunities for radical right parties in the 1980s, as a sizeable share of voters combined these attitudes (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; McGann and Kitschelt, 2005). For instance, Jean-Marie Le Pen claimed in the 1980s to have been a 'Reaganite' long before neoliberal policies became fashionable (quoted in Betz and Meret, 2012: 114). His daughter, however, has developed a rather coherent political project aimed at '*demon-dialisation*', shielding France from the influence of banks and big enterprises, stimulating re-industrialization by curtailing global trade, and fiercely protecting France's '*acquis sociaux*' by means of the welfare state – though, often, these services should be limited to French citizens (ibid: 118–120; see also Ivaldi, 2015).

This shift towards more left-leaning socio-economic policies is by no means restricted to the National Front. During the nineties, some existing radical right parties moved towards the economic

¹ As this definition shows, class is defined here in a narrow sense, i.e., as deriving from present socio-economic positions. A broader definition of class would also include past experiences such as the occupation and income of one's parents and social context. Such an approach, which is less common in the study of radical right and class, is beyond the scope of this paper.

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