



Populist radical right parties mobilizing ‘the people’? The role of populist radical right success in voter turnout



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ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of European populist radical right parties (PRRs) has often been argued as either a corrective or threat to democracy. In this study, we provide empirical scrutiny to these opposing claims and investigate the impact of successful PRRs on levels of voter turnout. We argue that the emergence of successful PRRs may either foster voter turnout, because they are passionate mobilizers that fulfill a watchdog function and re-introduce electoral competition; or inhibit voter turnout, because they introduce a more negative, hardened tone to politics that further triggers distrust towards politics, politicians and democracy. To investigate these possibilities, we examine whether various societal groups are affected by the emergence of successful PRRs. Using the six available waves of the European Social Survey for the period 2002–2012, we apply hierarchical fixed effect models to test the (de)mobilization potential of PRRs in 19 Western and 14 Eastern European countries. Our results suggest that the emergence of successful PRRs lowers the voting propensity of Eastern European citizens – in particular the young and those with positive attitudes towards immigrants. Whereas in Western Europe, the emergence of successful PRRs increases the propensity to go to the polls among higher educated, more politically interested citizens. The East European results are consistent with theories that those most likely to be affected by the negative campaigning of PRRs – those that oppose PRR ideology and those less politically experienced – will be less likely to turnout in response to the emergence of a successful PRR. The Western European results are consistent with theories that it is those who strongly oppose PRRs that will be motivated to turnout as a result of the emergence of a successful PRR.

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1. Introduction

European democracies have witnessed an increase in the popularity of populist radical right parties (PRRs) over the last three decades (Mudde, 2007). Parties that combine nativist, authoritarian and populist stances, such as the *Schweizerische Volkspartei* [Swiss People's Party, SVP] and the Hungarian *Jobbik* [Jobbik, the Movement for a Better Hungary], have received more than 15% of the popular vote lately. The electoral successes of PRRs have often been labeled as landmark political events, or even revolutions (e.g., the Dutch ‘Fortuyn-revolt’ (Couwenberg, 2004)), and have fueled much political turmoil. These observations appear to be at odds with the claim that contemporary politics and democracies have become largely depoliticized (Mair, 2006; Mouffe, 2005). Based on

decreasing numbers of political party partisans and members (Van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012), Mair (2006) even concluded that our European democracies have become ‘democracies without demos’. Hence, it is puzzling that these PRRs receive so much popular support and attention.

Various scholars claim, however, that PRRs have become popular exactly because of the widespread lack of political interest (Betz, 1994; Mair, 2006; Mouffe, 2005; Rydgren, 2007). Some argue that the mainstream political parties in European democracies have become too consensual, rational and pragmatic to overcome political and social conflicts, preventing voters from becoming involved in politics (Mouffe, 2005). PRRs that address the problems of the common man (referring to migration, crime, and globalization), use clear language that everyone can understand (Van Leeuwen, 2009), and emphasize popular sovereignty (Canovan, 1999), could attract an apolitical ‘silent majority’, thus leading to higher levels of turnout (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). In contrast, it could be argued that PRRs engage in a negative, uncivil

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rhetoric and use a harsh polarizing political style (Van Dooremalen, 2011). Their uncivil exchanges of political views could cause negative reactions towards politicians, the government and the whole electoral systems. This, in turn, may discourage people to turnout at elections (Mutz and Reeves, 2005).

What these theoretical notions suggest is that the electoral success of PRRs either inspires or discourages people to speak up and become active in politics. Hence, PRRs may play a mobilizing or demobilizing role when it comes to political engagement, and thus, their mere existence and popularity could be interpreted as a corrective or threat for democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Yet, the degree to which PRRs are able to affect such popular political engagement remains hitherto largely unknown. We argue that if PRR success affects political engagement at all, it should be mainly observed in voting behavior, which is the least demanding form of political engagement (e.g., De Rooij, 2011). Therefore, we pose the following research questions: what is the effect of the emergence of popular (and therefore successful) PRRs on levels of voter turnout in Europe? Who is encouraged to vote or discouraged from voting by successful PRRs?

Although several studies have addressed the impact of PRR success on the salience of issues of immigration and globalization (e.g., Ivarsson, 2005; Kriesi et al., 2008), people's anti-immigrant (Dunn and Singh, 2011; Semyonov et al., 2006; Wilkes et al., 2007) and authoritarian attitudes (Andersen and Evans, 2003), little is known about how these effects inform us about the effect of PRR success on *political behavior*. Certainly, some scholars studied PRR activists (e.g., Art, 2011; Klandermans and Mayer, 2006), but the effect of PRR success on more widespread forms of political behavior, and voter turnout in particular, has been scarcely studied. The few studies addressing this relationship have, moreover, remained on an exploratory level and show mixed evidence with regard to type of behavior. Quintelier (2008) found that the *Vlaams Belang* [Flemish Interest, VB] has recruited more than twenty-five thousand member over the years, which suggests that successful PRRs can positively affect political membership levels. In contrast, De Lange and Akkerman (2012) showed that Belgian voter turnout has been decreasing since 1997 while at the same time VB has become more and more popular, which contradicts the mobilization thesis.

With so few studies addressing the relationship between PRR-success and voter turnout, the question of whose political behavior is affected by successful PRRs remains hitherto unanswered. In spite of the immense literature investigating the PRRs' electorate (e.g., Backes and Moreau, 2012), we do not know whether successful PRRs trigger former non-voters to go the polling booth. Neither do we know whether there are certain social groups that may actually be appalled by the popularity and success of PRRs and therefore may decide to stop going to the polls, or feel urged to speak out against the 'rascals' (cf. Andersen and Evans, 2003). This is surprising, because there are good theoretical reasons to expect that the emergence of successful PRRs has differential, catalyzing or inhibiting, effects on the voter turnout of various social groups (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Kahn and Kenney, 1999).

This study tries to fill these theoretical and empirical lacunae by conducting a comparative analysis of the effect of PRR success on voter turnout in 19 Western and 14 Eastern European countries covering the period 2002–2012. As such, this study greatly extends the scope of earlier studies by including more countries over a longer period of time and by investigating differential impacts of PRR-success on various social groups in these societies. We make a distinction between Eastern and Western European countries, because there are remarkable differences between the Eastern and Western European PRRs in terms of ideology and style (cf. Bustikova, 2009). Moreover, the contexts in which the PRRs have

emerged and flourished differ substantively across the younger democracies of the Eastern European post-communist countries and the Western European countries that have a longer tradition of democracy and electoral competition (Rydgren, 2011). The comparative, cross-national nature of this study responds to Mudde's (2012) claim that more cross-national research is necessary to understand the impact of PRRs on people's political behavior; and enables us to make an empirical contribution to the debate on the consequences of populism on democracy (see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). To test our hypotheses we use all six waves of the European Social Survey (ESS, 2002–2012) and apply hierarchical fixed effect logistic modeling which enables us to identify the effect of changing levels of PRR success on levels of voter turnout in Europe.

2. Theory and hypotheses

In this section, we first establish how various prominent theories explain low levels of voter turnout. Then, we introduce explanations for how successful PRRs may foster or deteriorate voter turnout. Based on these explanations, we derive hypotheses about the effect of PRR success on voter turnout in general and on various groups in society in particular.

It is generally found that a large group of people in society have disengaged from politics, resulting in reduced levels of voter turnout. Various arguments have been postulated to explain this trend in turnout decline. First, the 'generation school' (cf. Blais and Rubenson, 2012; Smets and van Ham, 2013) addresses the changing attitudes towards democracy, politics and civic duty across generations. According to various scholars (e.g., Putnam, 2000), these changes have been caused by the decrease in significance and the involvement in traditional civic associations such as the church and the labor unions. As 'schools of democracy' (De Tocqueville, [1835–1840] 2000), these associations used to foster social trust across different social strata and (in)directly helped the development of norms that promote political and civic engagement, including the civic norm to go to the polls in the event of elections. However, due to modernization processes (such as the 'technological transformation of leisure', mobility and increasing female labor force participation (Putnam, 2000)), traditional civic life has declined and the development of widespread norms that turning out at elections is appreciated and good for one's country has been hindered. Consequently, younger cohorts generally have a lower sense of civic duty, and are less interested in electoral politics, which explains why fewer people turnout at elections now than 30 years ago (e.g., Dalton, 2008).

Second, the electoral competition or 'context school' (cf. Blais and Rubenson, 2012) argues that turnout has been declining due to characteristics of the elections rather than the structural or attitudinal changes of the electorate (Franklin, 2004). Over the last decades, prior to the rise of PRRs, people have felt that elections have become less relevant (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen, 1992), as elections have become less and less competitive (Franklin, 2004). Likewise, Mouffe (2005) argued that politics has become a politics of consensus in which traditional political parties rationally and pragmatically try to overcome political and social conflicts. The decrease in polarization and electoral competition, accompanied with converging ideological stances among the mainstream parties, e.g., about immigration and multiculturalism (e.g., Arzheimer and Carter, 2006), have made it difficult for ordinary citizens to distinguish the different parties. Consequently, mainstream political parties have discouraged citizens from becoming involved in politics, leading to lower levels of turnout.

Thirdly, it is argued that more people have stopped going to the polls, because they are dissatisfied with contemporary politics. This

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