



The dynamics of radical right-wing populist party preferences and perceived group threat: A comparative panel analysis of three competing hypotheses in the Netherlands and Germany



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ABSTRACT

Existing cross-sectional research considers citizens' preferences for radical right-wing populist (RRP) parties to be centrally driven by their perception that immigrants threaten the well-being of the national ingroup. However, longitudinal evidence for this relationship is largely missing. To remedy this gap in the literature, we developed three competing hypotheses to investigate: (a) whether perceived group threat is temporally prior to RRP party preferences, (b) whether RRP party preferences are temporally prior to perceived group threat, or (c) whether the relation between perceived group threat and RRP party preferences is bidirectional. Based on multiwave panel data from the Netherlands for the years 2008–2013 and from Germany spanning the period 1994–2002, we examined the merits of these hypotheses using autoregressive cross-lagged structural equation models. The results show that perceptions of threatened group interests precipitate rather than follow citizens' preferences for RRP parties. These findings help to clarify our knowledge of the dynamic structure underlying RRP party preferences.

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1. Introduction

Questions pertaining to the consequences of immigration and the integration of immigrants continue to rank high on the political and public agenda of numerous destination countries. In the political culture of Western Europe, this debate has often been accompanied by the emergence of radical right-wing populist (RRP) parties. Advocating harsh anti-immigrant policies often coupled with explicit opposition to Islam, RRP parties have gained considerable success in several elections (Rydgren, 2007). This development has prompted researchers across the social science disciplines to uncover the sources underlying citizens' preferences for RRP parties (Betz, 1994; Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Lubbers et al., 2002; Mudde, 2007; Norris, 2005). For example, to address macrolevel differences in RRP party preferences, one important line of research is concerned with the influence of contextual factors such as the relative share of the immigrant population (Arzheimer, 2009; Lubbers et al., 2002), the state of the economy (van der Brug et al., 2005), electoral system characteristics (Jackman and Volpert, 1996) or competition to the main RRP parties' rival (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006). Focusing the microlevel of analysis, another strand of studies examines the role played by peoples' sociostructural

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characteristics such as gender (Givens, 2004), employment status (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995) or education (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2010) in shaping interindividual differences in RRP support. However, all of these accounts agree that peoples' perceptions of threat from immigrants or immigration – broadly defined here as the view that immigrants harm the well-being of the national ingroup – represents the single most important proximal predictor of RRP party support (Arzheimer, 2008; van der Brug et al., 2000; Cutts et al., 2011; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Lubbers et al., 2002; Norris, 2005; Rydgren, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2001).¹ Yet this impressive body of research is not without its limitations. In particular, many of the aforementioned studies are restricted to testing their predictions drawing on cross-sectional, static research designs only. As a consequence, it is still unclear whether the basic proposition that threat perceptions are temporally prior to RRP party preferences is valid. By contrast, a longitudinal perspective opens up novel theoretical possibilities regarding the dynamics underlying threat perceptions and RRP party preferences. For instance, does the view that immigrants harm the well-being of the national ingroup indeed precede RRP party preferences, as a group conflict perspective suggests? Or do RRP party preferences precede threat perceptions, as the literature on party identification implies? Or do both processes operate in tandem, suggesting that there is a reciprocal dynamic relation between threat perceptions and RRP party preferences?

Apparently, the existence of alternative directions of influence between perceived group threat and RRP party preferences seems both sensible and very real. However, up to now, studies approaching the nexus of perceived group threat and RRP party preferences from a longitudinal perspective are largely missing. Yet without such research initiatives, conclusive evidence on the theoretical mechanisms that account for the association between threat perceptions and RRP party preferences over time cannot be established. This paper aims to improve upon this gap in the literature. Drawing on various lines of social science inquiry, we develop and test three competing hypotheses on the longitudinal relations of perceived group threat and RRP party preferences. In doing so, we join a growing group of researchers utilizing a dynamic perspective to study alternative directions of influence between issue opinions or attitudes and political preferences (e.g., Evans and Pickup, 2010; Vecchione et al., 2013). On a methodological level, we employ latent autoregressive cross-lagged structural equation modeling techniques (e.g., Selig and Little, 2012) – a particularly flexible method for simultaneously testing the unidirectional and bidirectional dynamic relations predicted by our theoretical models. On an empirical level, we examine the empirical adequacy of our hypotheses using multiwave panel data from two European countries: the Netherlands and Germany. This broad empirical source provides a rare opportunity to examine the cross-national generalizability of the nexus between threat perceptions and RRP party preferences. Specifically, parallel to intensive public discussion on immigration-related issues, both the Netherlands and Germany witnessed the emergence of RRP parties, albeit at different points in time. In the Netherlands, the *Party for Freedom* (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV), founded by its leader Geert Wilders in 2006, and the *Proud of the Netherlands* (Trots op Nederland, ToN) party, founded by Rita Verdonk in 2008, gained considerable electoral success and public support (Dutch Electoral Council, 2013). In Germany, the RRP party *The Republicans* (Die Republikaner, REP) received considerable political success in the early 1990s and attracted much public attention (Cole, 2005). Given that the Dutch *Party for Freedom* and *Proud of the Netherlands* (Vossen, 2010, 2011) as well as the German *The Republicans* (Cole, 2005; Thränhardt, 1995) are all well-known for their populist, anti-immigrant positions, these examples provide instructive test cases for a longitudinal investigation of the theoretical ideas outlined above.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Perceived group threat predicts RRP party preferences

The theoretical framework most commonly applied to connect citizens' perceptions of threat from immigrants with RRP party support is group conflict theory or, synonymously, group threat theory (Arzheimer, 2008; van der Brug et al., 2000; Cutts et al., 2011; Swyngedouw, 2001). The basic assumption underlying this perspective is that interethnic competition for valued resources leads majority members to perceive immigrants and immigration as a threat to the well-being of their national ingroup (Schlueter and Scheepers, 2010). These perceptions of threatened group interest have been found to relate to both tangible (e.g., employment or housing opportunities) and non-tangible goods (e.g., religious or language issues). The group conflict approach further maintains that even if majority members see their personal well-being as unaffected by immigrants, they might still view immigrants as endangering the interests of the national ingroup (Riek et al., 2006, p. 337). Presuming that there is a fundamental need of group members to secure the dominant position of the national ingroup, a sense of group threat is seen to motivate majority members to defend or restore the dominant status of their ingroup (Mughan and Paxton, 2006; Schlueter and Scheepers, 2010). Hence, given the RRP parties' strong anti-immigrant policy principles, supporting these parties represents an appealing strategy to achieve this aim.

¹ It should be acknowledged that alternative to the term 'perceived group threat,' describing the general idea that immigrants and immigration pose negative consequences for the host society, researchers have invented a multitude of labels, including 'foreigners impact on society' (Semyonov et al., 2006), or 'ethnic threat' (Scheepers et al., 2002). See also Rydgren's (2008) approach on different 'immigration frames.' Notwithstanding these semantic differences, all of these constructs generally are tested based on very similar if not identical empirical operationalizations.

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