



The centre-right versus the radical right: the role of migration issues and economic grievances

Tarik Abou-Chadi^a, Denis Cohen^b and Markus Wagner^c

^aDepartment of Political Science, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland; ^bMannheim Centre for European Social Research, University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany; ^cDepartment of Government, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

Radical right parties are strong competitors of the centre-right in many party systems. In this article, we first show that the centre-right's overall stability in terms of vote share masks clear patterns of competition between these two party groups. We then study the attitudinal determinants of the choice between centre-right and radical right parties, paying particular attention to the impact of the economic crisis of 2008 and the migration crisis of 2015. Using European Social Survey data from 2002 onwards, we show that the role of anti-migration views and economic grievances as predictors of the choice for radical right versus centre-right parties has strengthened over time. We then examine whether accommodating positional shifts by centre-right parties are successful in attracting potential radical right voters. Our analyses of voter transitions using election study data show that this is not the case.


KEYWORDS


Centre-right; party strategies; radical right; vote choice

Introduction

Established mainstream parties in Western Europe are without a doubt facing a fundamental crisis (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Much public debate and scholarly attention has focused on the comparatively homogeneous set of social-democratic, centre-left parties, where decline is widespread (Evans and Tilley 2017; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019). For these parties, researchers have identified the dilemmas arising from socio-economic transformations such as de-industrialization, globalisation and immigration as explanations for electoral decline (see e.g. Kitschelt 1994; Beramendi et al. 2015).

On the centre-right, what stands out instead is the diversity of fortunes: some established centre-right parties, such as in Spain, France or Italy, have seen dramatic declines in vote shares. Others, such as in Germany, Austria or the UK, have recovered from previous lows to once again become strong players in their party system. Perhaps as a result of this varying pattern of electoral success, no unifying narrative of party strategies and electoral dilemmas exists for the centre-right, even though socio-structural changes and the resulting transformation of the political space can also be seen as the root cause of the electoral challenges faced by some centre-right parties. For centre-right parties, the

CONTACT Tarik Abou-Chadi  abou-chadi@ipz.uzh.ch

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1853903>

© 2021 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

relevant social and economic changes are varied and range from secularisation to growing levels of education and further international integration.

In this paper, we examine what we see as a key factor affecting the electoral fortunes of centre-right parties: the emergence of new competitors on their right flank. In nearly all Western European countries, centre-right parties now face competition from populist radical right challengers. Even in countries such as Germany, which had long failed to see the emergence of such parties, the centre-right now needs to decide how to engage with radical right competitors. Here, we want to investigate competition between these two party families within the context of changing societies and economics. Our aim is to shed new light on the current electoral challenges of the centre-right.

We begin our paper by looking at descriptive patterns. We study voter transitions between centre-right and radical right parties based on a dataset of individual level data from nearly 100 elections, combining information from the CSES, the European Voter Project, and several national election studies. This initial descriptive analysis shows that centre-right parties face severe competition from radical right parties, who have become increasing destinations for defecting centre-right voters over the past 50 years. In the 2010s, centre-right parties lost more voters to the radical right than to liberal or centre-left parties. What drives these voter choices?

Research on this question is of course not new. Scholars have investigated determinants of radical right success for the past 25 years and have also specifically taken into account the challenges that the rise of the radical right means for the centre-right (Bale 2003, 2008). However, research that explicitly investigates micro-level dynamics of competition between radical right and centre-right parties is remarkably scarce. Influential studies, such as Ivarsflaten's (2008) seminal article, rely on data from the early 2000s. These studies identify anti-immigration attitudes as the core determinant of the radical right vote and also as the main predictor of the choice between centre-right and radical right parties. Individual economic conditions show much less of an effect in these earlier studies.

However, the context of choice has changed given global socio-economic transformations as well as the two major European crises – the economic crisis of 2008 and the migration crisis of 2015. We argue that these developments have potentially strengthened existing grievances and politicised new ones. The twin crises have thus changed patterns of competition between the centre-right and the radical right. Specifically, we consider how voter attitudes such as anti-immigration stances as well as economic insecurity and demands for more redistribution have changed as a predictor of choosing a radical right over a centre-right party over time.

Empirically, we tackle this question by analysing data from the European Social Survey (ESS) between 2002 and 2018 to determine the factors that predict vote choice between centre-right and radical right parties in 11 West European countries. We show that anti-immigration attitudes remain the most important predictor for choosing a radical right over a centre-right party. However, economic attitudes and economic insecurity have become stronger predictors of vote choice between these two party families.

Our second contribution is to consider whether centre-right party strategies can affect whether voters switch to the radical right. In settings where economic and in particular migration attitudes are salient motivations driving such defection, can centre-right parties shift positions to prevent vote loss? Hence, we examine whether centre-right

parties can prevent voter defection to the radical right through programmatic accommodation, i.e. by moving closer to the positions of the radical right on these dimensions.

To answer this question, we investigate how centre-right positions affect vote switching, again using the information from the CSES, the European Voter Project, and several national election studies. We find that variation in centre-right positions is hardly associated with vote switching between mainstream and radical right parties. We also demonstrate that the socio-economic context conditions often associated with the two crises (unemployment and immigration levels) have little direct impact on vote switching between centre-right and radical right parties. In contrast, party system salience of immigration leads to a net increase in support for the radical right.

Our findings thus contribute to a growing literature that investigates the transformations of European politics. We show that cultural and economic grievances increasingly contribute to choosing radical right over centre-right parties. However, in contrast to much public debate our findings do not support the idea that centre-right parties can affect this development by accommodating the radical right.

The puzzle: electoral competition between centre-right and radical right parties

While much research and commentary has focused on the decline of social democratic parties – and the question whether it stems from the defection of working class voters to the radical right – few inquiries investigate how the transformation of the political landscape over the course of the past 50 years has challenged centre-right parties. Panel A of [Figure 1](#) shows why this might be the case: On average, vote shares of West European centre-right parties have been remarkably stable since the 1970s. Even though centre-right parties have ceded their dominant position on the right-wing side of the political spectrum in recent elections in France and Italy, the success of centre-right parties, it seems, has by and large been unhampered by the emergence and consolidation of the radical right. The centre-right’s electoral stability is even more puzzling when we take into account that radical right parties have continuously grown into a

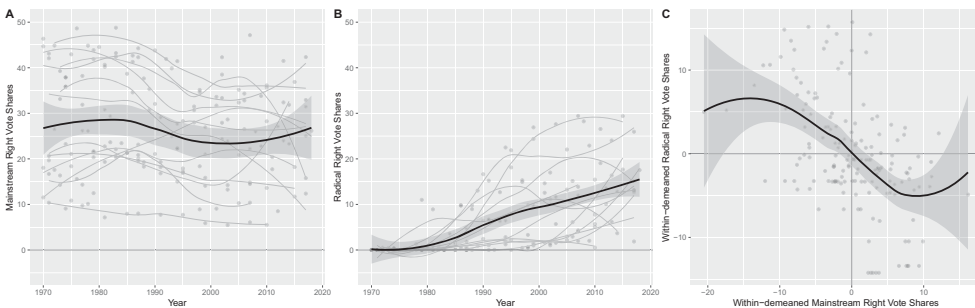


Figure 1. Electoral performance of centre-right and radical right parties 1970–2018.

Note: Panel A shows smoothed time trends in centre-right vote shares for 12 West European polities, along with a LOESS estimate of the average trend. Panel B shows the same for radical right parties. Panel C shows the relationship between country-demeaned centre-right and radical right vote shares.

sizable contender in most West European party systems, as depicted in Panel B of Figure 1.

However, it would be premature to conclude that the centre-right's standing has been unaffected by the rise of radical right challengers. Panel C of Figure 1 shows the deviation from the mean vote share within each country for centre-right parties (x-axis) and radical right parties (y-axis). This Figure illustrates that within countries, the electoral performance of centre-right and radical right parties has been closely related, as observations are either in the bottom-right or top-left quadrant. This means that, by and large, centre-right parties performed below average when radical right challengers performed above average in the same election, and vice versa. This, along with the fact that there are few observations in which parties of both families experienced concurrent strong above-average performances (the upper right quadrant of the plot), is a first indication how fiercely centre-right and radical right parties compete for the same groups of voters.

In order to emphasise this point more explicitly, we analyse voter transitions between parties of the two families in consecutive elections over the course of the past 50 years. For this, we use data on respondents' vote recalls for the current and previous general elections, collected from nearly 100 election studies. Using this novel data base, we can establish changes in the levels of electoral support for each party family and also track detailed flows of vote switching between party families from one election to the next.

Figure 2 shows voter transitions from a given election at $t-1$ (based on respondents' recalled vote choice in the previous election) to a subsequent election at t (based on respondents' recalled vote choice in the most recent election). The first, top-left plot of Figure 2 shows the transition patterns across six categories – the centre-right, the centre-left, radical right, liberals, other parties, and non-voters. The plot reveals some interesting overall patterns. First, the marginal distributions (displayed by the stacked bars on the left and right-hand sides of the plot) confirm that centre-right parties have on average maintained constant support: While 29.6% of voters vote for centre-right parties at $t-1$, the centre-right attracts 29.5% at t . Centre-left parties, on the other hand, lose more strongly, with an average vote share of 28.6% at $t-1$ versus an average vote share of 27.1% at t . The radical right, on the other hand, has strong average gains, going from an average 4.46% at $t-1$ to an average 5.75% at t .

Secondly, we see notable voter transfers between the centre-right and the radical right. While these flows are bidirectional, they are strongly lopsided: On average, radical right parties lose 0.6 percentage points to the centre-right from one election to the next. Centre-right parties, however, lose an average 1.1 percentage points to the radical right. Even though this share is the smallest among centre-right losses in absolute terms, centre-right voter transfers with the radical right stand out for three reasons. First, centre-right losses to the radical right are the largest relative to the size of the target party family. Secondly, the balance between gains from, and losses to, the radical right is more lopsided than it is for any other party family. And thirdly, aside from preserving their existing voter base, gains from centre-right parties are by far the largest contributor to radical right electorates, strongly outweighing gains from social democratic parties and from non-voters.

These patterns of dyadic competition between centre-right and radical right parties are even more pronounced when we move from the nascent phase of the West European

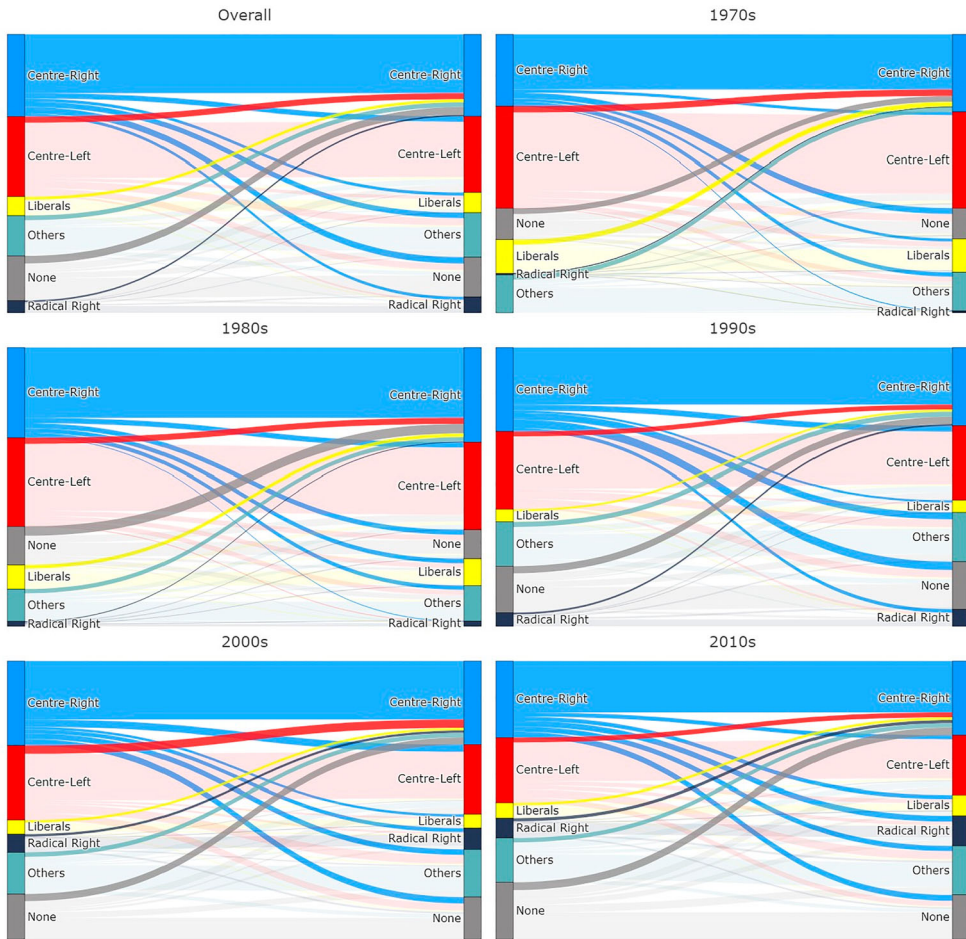


Figure 2. Voter transitions between party families by decades.

Note: Based on vote choice recall questions in 99 post-election surveys (CSES, EVP, and national election studies) in 12 West European polities (see text for more details).

radical right in the late 1970s and 1980s to later decades in which radical right parties emerged and consolidated in most party systems. Whereas voter transfers between centre-right and radical right parties are characterised by low levels and a fairly even balance in the 1970s and 1980s, radical right parties exchanged voters with centre-right parties in ever larger numbers and were the clear net beneficiaries of this trade from the 1990s onward. In the 2010s, centre-right parties even lost more voters to the radical right than to either social democratic or liberal parties. While the centre-right was the net beneficiary of voter exchanges with social democrats, their net losses to liberal parties are outweighed by their net losses to radical right parties in both relative and absolute numbers.

These descriptive insights show that – contrary to what the stability of average electoral support for centre-right parties in Western Europe may suggest – centre-right parties face fierce competition from the radical right. Centre-right parties have lost

increasing shares of voters to radical right parties over the past 50 years. These have contributed to the growth of the radical right more far strongly than voters defecting from any other party family or previous non-voters. Despite this, we still know surprisingly little about the underlying mechanics of dyadic competition between the two party families. In the following, we therefore discuss theoretical expectations and introduce empirical tests that help us better understand the socio-structural and attitudinal bases of electoral support for the two party families as well as the role of the centre-right's positional strategies in responding to the increasing challenge from the radical right.

Centre-right and radical right parties in a two-dimensional political space

Our starting point is the two-dimensional political space, with economic issues forming one dimension and cultural issues forming the other dimension (Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2008). Of course, more complex ways of dividing up political ideology exist. For one, economic issues can themselves be divided into subdimensions such as redistribution or investment-consumption, while cultural issues can be separated into subdimensions relating to social liberalism on the one hand and nationalism/immigration on the other (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Beramendi et al. 2015). However, for the sake of analytical simplicity we restrict ourselves to a two-dimensional space here and focus on nationalism/immigration issues, which have become dominant especially for understanding the fate of the radical right (Kriesi et al. 2008).

The positioning of centre-right parties within this space is often a challenging task. Generalisations are difficult mainly because the set of centre-right parties encompasses a range of party families, which may themselves be quite diverse (Hadj Abdou, Bale, and Geddes 2022). Specifically, the centre-right contains Christian Democratic parties such as the German CDU, Conservative parties such as the British Tories or the French Gaullists, and classically Liberal parties such as Venstre in Denmark or the VVD in the Netherlands.

In terms of economic policy, there is thus significant diversity on the centre-right, with Christian Democratic parties traditionally being more moderate than Liberal parties. All centre-right parties nevertheless tend to focus more on business interests and high growth rather than workers' rights or redistribution. Centre-right parties are therefore generally positioned to the right of the centre-left on economic questions, but the distance to the centre-left can vary quite significantly.

In terms of immigration policy, there is no unified position of centre-right parties (Hadj Abdou, Bale, and Geddes 2022). Yet, it is clear that centre-right parties are tougher than the left, yet more moderate than the radical right. While the centre-right has no qualms with professing goals of lower migration numbers, these parties tend to shy away from the outright xenophobia or Islamophobia often voiced by more radical competitors. Moreover, centre-right parties tend to be more pro-European and hence more accepting of intra-EU migration.

Despite the necessary caveats given diversity, centre-right parties can thus usually be positioned to the right of the centre on economic questions, although the distance to the centre varies considerably. They are also generally right-of-centre on the second dimension, including on the issue of immigration. Here, centre-right parties are generally not the most extreme party: this label tends to apply to the radical right.

The radical right is thus easier to place on the cultural dimension: it is clearly on the authoritarian end of this dimension, even if some parties hold more liberal views on some issues (e.g. Pim Fortuyn's defence of gay rights in the Netherlands in 2002). However, on the economic dimension these parties are harder to position. Kitschelt and McGann (1995) famously argued that a winning formula exists, whereby the radical right combines their authoritarian second-dimension positions with more neo-liberal positions on the economic dimension. However, other scholars have since demonstrated that radical right parties have moved away from such economic positions, if they ever held them (McGann and Kitschelt 2005; de Lange 2007).

It may also be that the role of economic issues in radical right ideology is more complex. For instance, some authors have argued that economic positions simply do not matter much for the fate of the radical right (Mudde 2007) or that they deliberately blur their economic positions (Rovny 2013). To the extent that the radical right does position itself on economic topics, it may do so in ways that depart from mainstream approaches. Thus, radical right parties might frame economic questions in terms of populist opposition to establishment elites. Economic criticism may enter party competition through the backdoor as criticism of globalisation and economic mismanagement, with radical right parties claiming to stand for those 'left behind' by current policies. Hence, radical right parties' anti-establishment rhetoric may often have an economic component to it. Related to this is the notion of 'welfare chauvinism', where radical right parties frame economic questions in terms of state support for native-born citizens rather than recent immigrants (Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016; Careja et al. 2016; Ennsner-Jedenastik 2018; Marx and Naumann 2018).

Overall, there is nevertheless an emerging consensus that radical right parties are clearly characterised by strong anti-immigration positions, but tend to take centrist positions on economic issues that are sometimes more moderate than their centre-right competitors.

In sum, the difference between centre-right and radical right parties is both clearer and more pronounced on second-dimension issues. It is thus here that we should expect the key ideological competition between these two sets of parties, with competition based on economic positioning less pronounced (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). Indeed, individual-level analyses of voting behaviour demonstrate that anti-immigration attitudes are the strongest predictor for radical right voting in general (Norris 2005) and for centre-versus-radical right competition in particular (Ivarsflaten 2008; Aichholzer et al. 2014).

The arguments discussed so far focus on long-term structural transformations of the political space, with many of the empirical analyses relying on data from the (early) 2000s. In the next section, we argue that the 'proletarianization' (Betz 1994) of the radical right as well as the two major European crises in the past two decades have potentially altered these patterns of competition.

The effects of the economic and migration crises

Important events such as political and economic crises can generally have two electorally relevant effects on attitudes. Such events can shift attitudes (persuasion) as well as increase the salience of certain issues for political decisions (priming) (Lenz 2009; Tesler 2015). For example, the nuclear disaster in Fukushima may have pushed many

citizens to oppose nuclear energy (persuasion), but it may have equally increased the relevance of stances on nuclear energy for voting decisions (priming). We argue that such effects will likely have occurred in the aftermath of the two major crises of the past two decades.

First, the financial and economic crisis will have led voters to base their party choice more on economic attitudes and grievances. The crisis increased voter dissatisfaction with existing elites in many countries (Kroknes, Jakobsen, and Grønning 2015). In many cases, the crisis directly reduced the perceived competence of governments (Bellucci, Lobo, and Lewis-Beck 2012; Bélanger and Nadeau 2014). However, this dissatisfaction may often have spread to the 'ruling elite' as a whole. Part of this reaction may have been ideological, with voters dissatisfied with centrist policy solutions (Hobolt and Tilley 2016). However, many voters will also have seen the crisis as discrediting elites in general, in particular their economic competence (Hernández and Kriesi 2016). Hence, dissatisfaction with economic management by existing mainstream parties as a whole increased among the public. Note that there is little evidence that the financial and economic crisis shifted attitudes (Margalit 2013), but the crisis did lead to (1) changing perceptions of government and mainstream party competence as well as (2) the priming of economic attitudes.

We argue that the financial and economic crisis led to an increase in the role of economic considerations in determining the choice between centre-right and radical right parties. First, voters dissatisfied with the economic situation increasingly turned to radical right rather than centre-right parties as these parties mobilised anti-elite stances. Second, voters with more centrist or even leftist economic views also preferred the radical right to the centre-right as these parties on average hold more centrist positions and embrace welfare chauvinism, which posits strong state involvement, if only for natives. Hence, the crisis clarified the radical right's position as an anti-elite, more economically centrist alternative to the centre-right. We therefore expect the effect of economic perceptions and attitudes on the choice between radical- and centre-right parties to have increased since 2008.

Second, the 2015 migration crisis will in turn have led voters to base their party choice more on immigration attitudes. The migration crisis increased the salience of immigration and integration issues in many countries (Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019; Mader and Schoen 2019), which increased the importance of these issues for vote choice (Dennison 2019). The migration crisis may also have affected attitudes, with some voters becoming more opposed to immigration (Hangartner et al. 2019; Mader and Schoen 2019). As a result, we would expect the effect of anti-immigration attitudes on the choice between radical- and centre-right parties to have increased since 2015.

In sum, we expect that both economic and immigration attitudes are increasingly strong predictors of why voters choose either the radical or the centre-right, with the effect of economic attitudes strengthening since 2008 and that of immigration attitudes since 2015.

Centre-right strategies

Our discussion so far has regarded centre-right parties as static actors in this development. However, being aware of these transformations, centre-right parties of course have the possibility to counteract these changes and potentially prevent vote losses to

the radical right. Indeed, academics, pundits and politicians themselves see a lack of positional adjustment in response to the radical right as a main reason for the electoral decline of the centre-right. How successful is accommodating radical right positions likely to be?

Given that radical right parties appeal to former centre-right (and centre-left) voters on policy grounds, and in particular on immigration, it is natural to ask how centre-right strategies could potentially alter the dynamics of competition with the radical right. Research has demonstrated that centre-right parties have become more right-wing on cultural issues, particularly on immigration and especially in response to radical right success (Wagner and Meyer 2017; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). Following a basic logic of spatial competition, such positional shifts should help weaken radical right parties. In her seminal work on competition with niche parties, Meguid (2005, 2008) indeed argues and empirically demonstrates that such accommodative strategies weaken radical right parties electorally.

However, it is doubtful that centre-right parties can successfully employ such strategies. First, in appealing to potential supporters of the radical right, the centre-right faces the challenge of ideological consistency and credibility (Webb and Bale 2014). Centre-right parties often have strong links to business groups, which tend to favour globalisation and economic migration (Allern 2010; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). Christian Democratic parties also have ties to religious groups that support protection for refugees on moral grounds. More broadly, centre-right parties also need the support of moderate voters, who might be put off by strong anti-migration stances (Webb and Bale 2014). Hence, centre-right parties may have problems to credibly accommodate radical right positions.

Second, shifts toward more anti-immigration positions may help to legitimize the radical right. When centre-right parties adjust their position toward the radical right, they bring these positions and the associated rhetoric into the mainstream.

In contrast to a simple spatial logic, this process may strengthen the radical right (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Dahlström and Sundell 2012; Wodak 2015). As famously formulated by Jean-Marie Le Pen, voters might simply vote for the original rather than the copy.

Vote choice analysis

Data and method

In order to test these expectations, we make use of two different data sources. First, we analyze data from the European Social Survey in order to investigate determinants of individual vote choice between centre-right and radical right parties. Our sample includes 11 countries in the time period from 2002 to 2018.¹

As our dependent variable we construct a dummy variable that takes on the value of 1 if a respondent voted for a centre-right party in the previous election and 0 if they voted for a radical right party. Our analysis will thus show us how our independent variables affect voting for the centre-right relative to the radical right. Following our expectations we include three main independent variables that should determine choosing between a centre-right and a radical right party. Table A2 in the Appendix shows our list of centre-right parties.

First, we include a respondent's attitude toward immigration.² Anti-immigration attitudes have regularly been identified as a main predictor of vote choice for radical right parties and should make individuals more likely to support a radical right instead of a centre-right party.

Second, as radical right parties show more centrist (and welfare-chauvinist) positions, we investigate if economic policy preferences affect choosing a radical right over a centre-right party.³ Individuals who prefer more redistribution should be more likely to vote for a radical right instead of a centre-right party.

Third, individuals may be more likely to support radical right parties if they face challenging economic circumstances. For example, it may be that those facing economic difficulties develop anti-elite attitudes, which then lead them to support parties on the radical right. We test this argument using a variable for subjective household income that aims to capture economic grievances.⁴ We standardise these variables in order to make the effect sizes more readily comparable.

Earlier studies have clearly demonstrated that anti-immigration attitudes are the most important factor for radical right vote choice, while other and especially economic factors only play a minor role, if at all. We have argued that the economic as well as the so-called migration crisis and the 'proletarianization' of the radical right have potentially strengthened and mobilised grievances beyond anti-immigration attitudes. We investigate our argument by interacting each of our three main variables of interest with three period dummies representing the period before 2008 between 2008 and 2015 and since 2015. Before doing so, we first want to analyse if the occupational structure of centre-right and radical right voting has indeed changed in the last 15 years. We run a simple model that explains vote choice between centre-right and radical right based on occupational groups following the class scheme developed by (Oesch 2006) and analyse the variation in effect size over the same three periods.

We estimate logit models with two-way fixed effects for country and study year. In our main models, we include a number of socio-demographic control variables that have been demonstrated to affect vote choice and will likely be correlated with our attitudinal measures as well. Our models thus include measures of age, education, religious attendance and gender. All our findings remain substantively the same if we add a measure of left-right self-placement.

Results

We begin our empirical results by presenting, in [Figure 3](#), how the composition of class groups voting for the radical right instead of the centre-right has changed in the past 20 years. We can see the predicted probability of voting for a centre-right party (versus a radical right party) for different class groups and how this varies for the three periods. For all class groups we can see some reduction in support for the centre-right. Overall, centre-right parties have lost out to the radical right.

We see a linear decline in support throughout all class groups – although it comes with higher levels on uncertainty for the post 2015 period, where we have significantly less cases.⁵ The size of the declining support varies considerably over class groups. Centre-right parties have seen particularly strong reductions in support among service workers and especially production workers. After2015, the predicted probability of

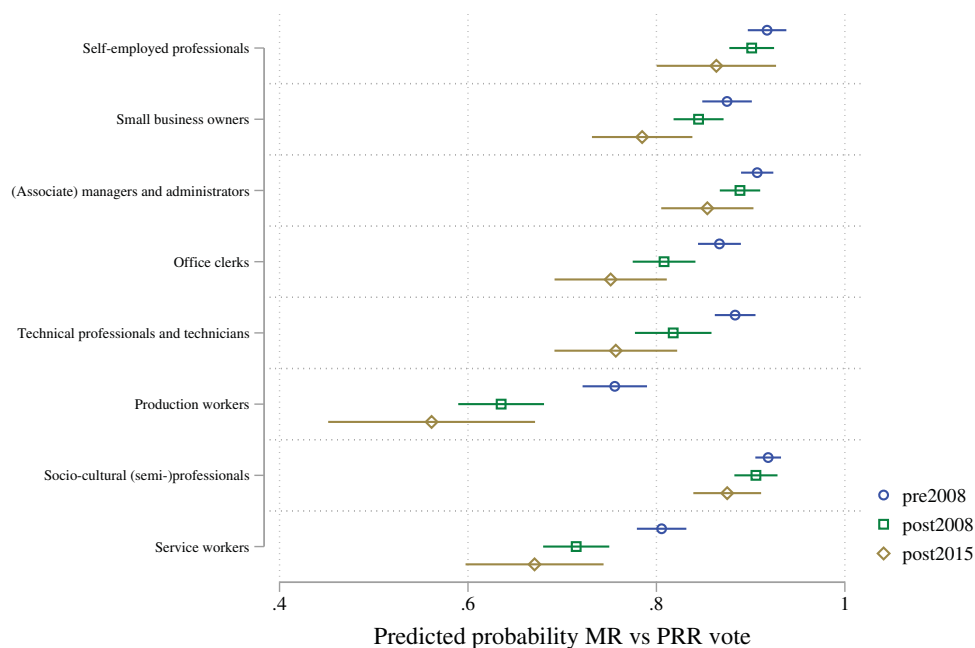


Figure 3. Predicted probability of occupational group voting for a centre-right instead of radical right party.

Note: Horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals.

voting for a centre-right instead of a radical right party for a production worker is below 60 percent. This effect is considerable since the overall distribution in our sample shows 83 percent voting for the centre-right and only 17 percent supporting the radical right.

The radical right has therefore seen a phase of ‘proletarianization’ (Betz 1994) and has attracted more working-class voters (McGann and Kitschelt 2005), arguably at least partly as a result of their more centrist economic policies (Harteveld 2016). The radical right has managed to attract an increasing share of voters among all class groups but has been especially successful among those that can be labelled ‘losers of globalization’ (Kriesi et al. 2008). Next, we examine the attitudinal patterns that underlie this pattern of voting.

In Figure 4 we now present the main findings of our model analysing vote choice between the centre-right and radical right (the regression table can be found in the Appendix). We show the average marginal effect of anti-immigration attitudes, attitudes toward redistribution and subjective household income on voting for the centre-right instead of the radical right. Note that comparing the magnitude of effects of attitudinal variables is not an unproblematic task, as the various attitudes may be related and influence each other. However, our main interest is in examining how attitudinal effects vary across time, and here these issues may be less severe.

Figure 4 shows that voters who are more anti-immigration, pro-redistribution and have less subjective income are less likely to support a centre-right party. It also shows us that there is considerable variation of these effects over time. Anti-immigration attitudes are clearly the strongest predictor of voting for the radical right instead of the centre-right. A one standard-deviation change toward more anti-immigration attitudes

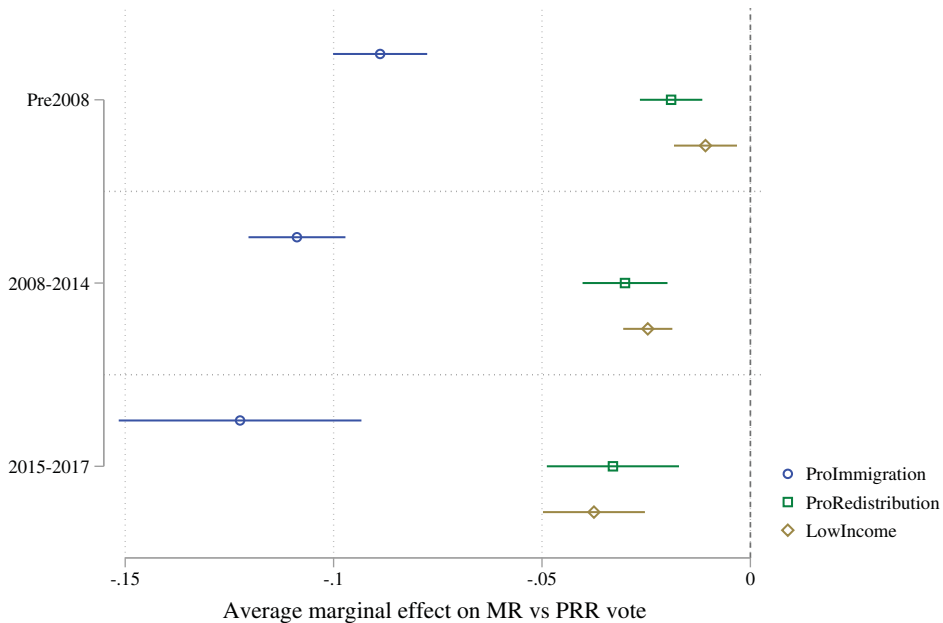


Figure 4. Average marginal effect on voting for a centre-right instead of radical right party.

Note: Horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals. Additional control variables not displayed. Full results in Appendix.

reduces the predicted probability to choose a centre-right party on average by about 10 percent. The effect of anti-immigration attitudes has also grown over time. The increase in the effect of this variable predates the migration crisis and can already be seen in the period following the European economic crisis.

Compared to anti-immigration attitudes, redistributive attitudes and subjective income clearly matter much less for explaining why voters prefer the radical over the centre-right. However, for both of these variables we see an increasing effect over time. The increase coincides with elections after the financial and economic crisis. In line with our expectations, we find that for the elections after 2008, there is a significant increase in the effects for redistributive attitudes and subjective income. Economic grievances have increased in their importance for explaining the choice for a radical right instead of a centre-right party. For the period after the so-called migration crisis we again see an increase in the importance of these three sets of attitudes. However, due to the smaller sample size, these estimates come with quite some uncertainty. The difference is only significant for subjective income.

In sum, our vote choice analysis shows that while anti-immigration attitudes have remained the most important predictor of supporting a radical right instead of a centre-right party, economic grievances have become more important following the economic and financial crisis. In line with this, we can show that centre-right parties have increasingly lost support from working-class voters who have now become more likely to support the radical right. A different way of looking at this is that we are seeing increasing sorting along these dimensions between the radical right and centre-right. Anti-immigration attitudes and economic grievances increasingly structure political decisions between centre-right and radical right. Considering that the centre-right is

the overall loser of this competition, this is not good news for the centre-right. In the next section, we turn to the question of whether centre-right parties can counter this development by adjusting their policy positions toward the radical right.

Party strategy analysis

Empirical strategy

Our descriptive analyses already gave some insight into the patterns of dyadic competition between centre-right and radical right parties. Voter transitions occur bidirectionally, but they are lopsided: Radical right parties tend to win more voters from centre-right parties than vice versa. We now turn to the question whether centre-right parties have some level of control over the balance of this trade. We thus analyse whether their strategies on the economic dimension and on immigration predict how strongly they lose voters to, and gain voters from, the radical right.

To do so, we use a newly compiled data set of national election studies, elections from waves 2–4 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems 2015a, 2015b, 2017) and from the European Voter Project (Thomassen 2005). We create a stacked data matrix that pairs individual respondents with each of the centre-right parties competing in the respective electoral context.⁶ For each voter-party dyad, we observe one of three outcomes of interest: If the voter switched from the respective centre-right party to the radical right (*losses*, coded -1), from the radical right to the respective centre-right party (*gains*, coded $+1$), or neither (coded 0 ; this includes staying with any available party or switching among other competitors). We then use this indicator as the outcome variable in a series of hierarchical regressions models. Random intercepts at the party-election level capture nominal percentages of each centre-right party's gross losses to, gross gains from, and net transfers with the radical right.

Our goal, then, is to establish how centre-right parties' strategies, if at all, explain variation in their aggregate gains and losses. We therefore combine the micro-level data on voter transfers with information on centre-right strategies from the Manifesto Project. Specifically, we focus on the effects of centre-right parties' positions on the issues of immigration and economics.⁷ By estimating the effects of party positions on gross losses to, gross gains from, and net transfers with the radical right, we can establish how a party's strategies on the two dimensions of the political space affect its fortunes in direct competition with the radical right.

We add a number of control variables. First, we adjust for centre-right parties' past positions on immigration and economics, as these have likely affected vote choices at $t-1$ and therefore condition the scope of feasible voter transfers at t . Second, to account for performance-related voting decisions, we adjust for centre-right parties' pre-election government status. We distinguish parties in opposition from those in government and those in a governing coalition with radical right involvement. Third, as feasible voter transfers are subject to the size of the two parties competing for voters, we adjust for the vote shares of both centre-right and radical right at $t-1$. Fourth, we account for the positions of other parties in the competitive environment by observing the most restrictive position on immigration taken by other mainstream parties.

Lastly, we take into account some characteristics of the broader political, economic, and demographic context: The party system salience of immigration and economics,⁸ national unemployment rates at $t-1$ and t , and the percentage of the foreign population at $t-1$ and t . We add random effects at the country and election levels to capture the dependence among parties from the same electoral contexts and same countries, respectively. Within-election (design or poststratification) weights adjust for disproportionate sampling probabilities of certain individuals in a given survey; between-election weights adjust for discrepancies in sample sizes across surveys and ensure that each electoral context is given equal weight.

Results

Figure 5 shows the marginal effects of a selection of covariates on centre-right parties’ net transfers with the radical right. Models 1–3 test the influence of contextual characteristics. Model 1 shows the effects of unemployment and the foreign-born population, Model 2 shows the effects of party system salience of immigration and economic issues. Model 3 adds both sets of variables jointly. In Model 4, lastly, we add centre-right positions on immigration and the economy along with the remaining control variables (whose effects are not displayed).

As Model 1 demonstrates, we do not find any effect of the socio-economic context. Neither unemployment rates nor shares of immigrants significantly affect vote switching between centre-right and radical right parties. These findings seem noteworthy to us as they challenge the common wisdom on how the economic and the so-called migration crises have affected patterns of support for the radical right. While our micro-level analysis shows that determinants of support for radical right instead of centre-right parties have changed during the time of the economic and financial crisis, these do not translate into vote switching per se as a result of changes in economic conditions and shares of immigrants in a country. While voters may have changed their support dynamics during the time of the big two crises in the past 15 years, these patterns do not seem generalisable to the indicators most often associated with these crises: unemployment rates and immigration numbers.

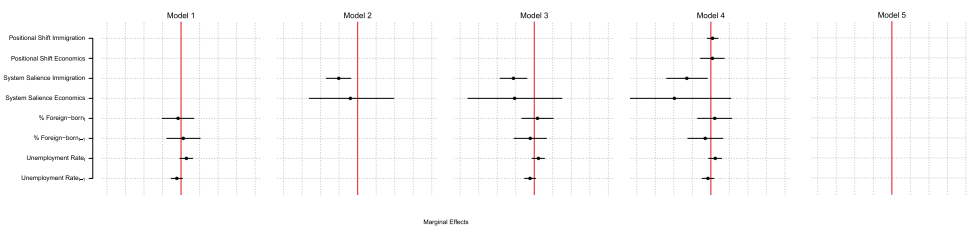


Figure 5. Marginal effects on centre-right net gains, gross gains, and gross losses from/to the radical right.

Note: Horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals. Additional control variables for models 4 (not displayed): centre-right positions on immigration and economics at $t - 1$; centre-right government status in the previous legislative cycle (in opposition, in government, in government with radical right); mainstream competitors’ most restrictive immigration position; centre-right vote share at $t - 1$; radical right vote share at $t - 1$. All estimates based on hierarchical models with intercepts varying across countries, elections, and election-party-combinations. Full results in Appendix.

Model 2, however, shows that there is a statistically significant effect of the political salience of immigration issues. When mainstream parties emphasise immigration-related issue more this leads to an increase of voters supporting radical right instead of centre-right parties. As we can see in Model 3, these findings are robust to including the objective socio-economic indicators measuring unemployment rates and shares of immigrants in a country. These findings indicate that the transformations in voter support associated with the economic and so-called migration crisis are much more related to a transformation of the salience of immigration issues in party competition than to objective changes in socio-economic context conditions.

Model 4 includes centre-right parties' policy positions. Since there is no significant effect, these models demonstrate that centre-right parties are not able to win voters back (or lose fewer voters) when they accommodate the positions of the radical right. Neither changes in economic positions nor in positions on immigration can prevent centre-right parties from losing to the radical right.

In sum, the only consistently significant effect is that of the systemic salience of immigration: When parties collectively emphasise this issue domain in an election campaign, centre-right parties have significantly lower net gains from radical right parties. As Models 1–3 show, this effect appears entirely independent of actual levels or changes in the number of foreign-born residents in a country. It is worth emphasising that this effect is specific to the collective emphasis of all (nonradical right) parties on the immigration issue. Centre-right parties thus suffer from electoral dynamics which are, to some extent, beyond their control. This is underscored by Model 4, which shows that centre-right parties' positional strategies do little to gain voters from the radical right. In contrast, as shown in a separate analysis of the centre-right's gains from and losses to the radical right (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix), rightward shifts on immigration significantly increase gross losses to radical right parties.

Conclusion

In this article we demonstrate how centre-right parties compete electorally with the radical right. We base our explanations on a two-dimensional conception of the political space and build our analysis on a broad literature that identifies anti-immigration attitudes as the main driver behind support for the radical right.

Four findings summarise our analysis. First, the overall stability of the vote share of centre-right parties masks that these parties tend to suffer when the radical right does well electorally. Election results and voter transition data show that the radical right and the centre-right are clear rivals for voter support.

Second, our analysis of ESS data shows that patterns of individual support for radical right instead of centre-right parties have indeed changed over time. All class groups show a shift towards the radical right, indicating that the support base of the radical right is now broader than before. However, it is also the case that working-class voters in particular have become more likely to vote for a radical right instead of a centre-right party. These analyses also show that anti-immigration attitudes have become even more relevant as the main predictor for choosing a radical right party, but economic grievances have also grown in importance. Interestingly, we find that anti-immigration attitudes rose in relevance even in the period immediately before

the migration crisis of 2015, providing further evidence that the crisis is linked to broader transformations rather than being a single revolutionary moment (Hadj-Abdou, Bale and Geddes 2022).

Third, the objective socio-economic indicators usually associated with the two crises do not help to explain patterns of voter transitions between centre-right and radical right parties. In contrast, voter transitions are much more related to systemic salience of immigration issues on the party system agenda.

Finally, we find that centre-right parties can apparently do little to prevent vote loss to radical right parties by adjusting their policy position toward more anti-immigration positions. In our analysis, centre-right parties that pursue such strategies are not less likely to lose voters to their radical right competitors; if anything, the opposite is the case.

Our findings contribute to two current debates surrounding the transformation of political competition in Europe. First, there is much debate on the challenges facing social democratic parties, whose decline in the last two decades has been manifest (Karreth, Polk, and Allen 2013; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019; Benedetto, Hix, and Mastroiocco 2020). This paper shows that the big crises of the past two decades have also affected centre-right parties' positions in the electoral market, even if these parties have not faced a similar average decline in vote shares. Radical right parties attract voters from the centre-right across all groups, but particularly from the working class. The increasing role of attitudinal differences and economic grievances point to a stable basis of party support for the radical right. Like the parties of the centre-left, centre-right parties seem to face a fundamental dilemma: on the one hand losing (working-class) support to the radical right while on the other hand facing more liberal challengers that compete for their business-minded electorate.

Our second contribution relates to party strategies. Again, social democratic parties' decisions have been examined in great detail, beginning with Kitschelt (1994). These debates have been revived given the obvious decline of centre-left parties in many countries (Bale et al. 2010; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019, 2020). We think that equal attention should be paid to centre-right strategies, which remain underexamined despite important exceptions (Bale 2003, 2008; Meguid 2008; Pardos-Prado 2015). In public debates, the loss of votes of centre-right parties to the radical right is often attributed to the rising number of immigrants and to elite failure to move towards tougher anti-immigration positions. Our results show that neither objective measures of immigrant shares nor more anti-immigration positions of centre-right parties affect their vote loss toward the radical right. The systemic salience of the immigration issue does appear to play a role, but beyond that, the challenge for the centre-right appears to be structural and hard to shift. For centre-right parties that hope to win back voters from the radical right by curtailing immigration, this presents a real challenge, as it appears that there is little they can do on their own to win voters tempted by the radical right. Instead, they need to hope for broader changes in societal and economic conditions.

Notes

1. AT, BE, CH, DE, DK, FI, FR, GB, NL, NO, SE. Because of a lack of consistent coverage in the ESS we do not include Italy in the vote choice analysis.

2. We construct an additive measure out of 3 items in the ESS measuring cultural, economic and general attitudes toward immigration.
3. Wording: ‘Should governments reduce differences in incomes?’
4. Wording: ‘Feeling about household’s income nowadays’.
5. Using a linear time trend for all years instead indeed shows that there is a linear decline throughout all class groups.
6. We include all parties of the Conservative and Christian Democratic party families, as well as select members of the liberal party family, that attract at least 5% of the vote in a given election. For details, see Table A4 in the Online Appendix.
7. Our *immigration* measure is based on four items: *per601* (National way of life: positive), *per602* (National way of life: negative), *per607* (Multiculturalism: positive) and *per608* (Multiculturalism: negative). Following Bakker and Hobolt (2013), we use a broad *economics* measure that combines eight ‘rightist’ and twelve ‘leftist’ items on the regulation of the economy, welfare services, and labor relations. We construct logit scales for party positions as suggested by Lowe et al. (2011).
8. Party system salience scores are averages of party-specific log salience scores, where each party’s contribution to the party system average is weighted by its vote share. To avoid endogeneity issues, we only include non-radical right parties for the construction of these measures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Abou-Chadi, Tarik, and Werner Krause. 2020. “The Causal Effect of Radical Right Success on Mainstream Parties’ Policy Positions: A Regression Discontinuity Approach.” *British Journal of Political Science* 50 (4): 829–849.
- Abou-Chadi, Tarik, and Markus Wagner. 2019. “The Electoral Appeal of Party Strategies in Post-Industrial Societies: When Can the Mainstream Left Succeed?” *Journal of Politics* 81 (4): 1405–1419.
- Abou-Chadi, Tarik, and Markus Wagner. 2020. “Electoral Fortunes of Social Democratic Parties: Do Second Dimension Positions Matter?” *Journal of European Public Policy* 27 (2): 246–272.
- Aichholzer, Julian, Sylvia Kritzinger, Markus Wagner, and Eva Zeglovits. 2014. “How Has Radical Right Support Transformed Established Political Conflicts? The Case of Austria.” *West European Politics* 37 (1): 113–137.
- Allern, Elin Haugsgjerd. 2010. *Political Parties and Interest Groups in Norway*. Colchester: ECPR press.
- Arzheimer, Kai, and Elisabeth Carter. 2006. “Political Opportunity Structures and Right-Wing Extremist Party Success.” *European Journal of Political Research* 45 (3): 419–443.
- Bakker, Ryan, and Sara B. Hobolt. 2013. “Measuring Party Positions.” In *Political Choice Matters: Explaining the Strength of Class and Religious Cleavages in Cross-National Perspective*, edited by Geoffrey Evans and Nan Dirk de Graaf, 27–45. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bale, Tim. 2003. “Cinderella and Her Ugly Sisters: The Mainstream and Extreme Right in Europe’s Bipolarising Party Systems.” *West European Politics* 26 (3): 67–90.
- Bale, Tim. 2008. “Turning Round the Telescope: Centre-Right Parties and Immigration and Integration Policy in Europe.” *Journal of European Public Policy* 15 (3): 315–330.
- Bale, Tim, Christoffer Green-Pedersen, André Krouwel, Kurt Richard Luther, and Nick Sitter. 2010. “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): 410–426.

- Bélangier, Eric, and Richard Nadeau. 2014. "Economic Crisis, Party Competence and the Economic Vote." *Acta Politica* 49 (4): 462–485.
- Bellucci, Paolo, Marina Costa Lobo, and Michael S. Lewis-Beck. 2012. "Economic Crisis and Elections: The European Periphery." *Electoral Studies* 31 (3): 469–471.
- Benedetto, Giacomo, Simon Hix, and Nicola Mastrorocco. 2020. "The Rise and Fall of Social Democracy 1918–2017." *American Political Science Review* 114 (3): 928–939.
- Beramendi, Pablo, Silja Hausermann, Herbert Kitschelt, and Hans-Peter Kriesi, eds. 2015. *The Politics of Advanced Capitalism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Betz, Hans-Georg. 1994. *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: MacMillan.
- Careja, Romana, Christian Elmelund-Præstekær, Michael Baggesen Klitgaard, and Erik Gahner Larsen. 2016. "Direct and Indirect Welfare Chauvinism as Party Strategies: An Analysis of the Danish People's Party." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 39 (4): 435–457.
- The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. 2015a. "CSES MODULE 2 FULL RELEASE [dataset]." December 15, version.
- The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. 2015b. "CSES MODULE 3 FULL RELEASE [dataset]." December 15, version.
- The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. 2017. "CSES MODULE 4 FOURTH ADVANCE RELEASE [dataset]." April 11, version.
- Dahlström, Carl, and Anders Sundell. 2012. "A Losing Gamble: How Mainstream Parties Facilitate Anti-Immigrant Party Success." *Electoral Studies* 31 (2): 353–363.
- de Lange, Sarah L. 2007. "A New Winning Formula? The Programmatic Appeal of the Radical Right." *Party Politics* 13 (4): 411–435.
- Dennison, James. 2019. "How Issue Salience Explains the Rise of the Populist Right in Western Europe." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 32 (3): 397–420.
- De Vries, Catherine E., and Sara B. Hobolt. 2020. *Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ennsner-Jedenastik, Laurenz. 2018. "Welfare Chauvinism in Populist Radical Right Platforms: The Role of Redistributive Justice Principles." *Social Policy & Administration* 52 (1): 293–314.
- Evans, Geoffrey, and James Tilley. 2017. *The new Politics of Class: The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grande, Edgar, Tobias Schwarzbözl, and Matthias Fatke. 2019. "Politicizing Immigration in Western Europe." *Journal of European Public Policy* 26 (10): 1444–1463.
- Hadj Abdou, Leila, Tim Bale, and Andrew Peter Geddes. 2022. "Centre-Right Parties and Immigration in an Era of Politicisation." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48 (2): 327–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1853901>.
- Hangartner, Dominik, Elias Dinas, Moritz Marbach, Konstantinos Matakos, and Dimitrios Xefteris. 2019. "Does Exposure to the Refugee Crisis Make Natives More Hostile?" *American Political Science Review* 113 (2): 442–455.
- Harteveld, Eelco. 2016. "Winning the 'Losers' But Losing the 'Winners'? The Electoral Consequences of the Radical Right Moving to the Economic Left." *Electoral Studies* 44: 225–234.
- Hernández, Enrique, and Hanspeter Kriesi. 2016. "The Electoral Consequences of the Financial and Economic Crisis in Europe." *European Journal of Political Research* 55 (2): 203–224.
- Hobolt, Sara B., and James Tilley. 2016. "Fleeing the Centre: The Rise of Challenger Parties in the Aftermath of the Euro Crisis." *West European Politics* 39 (5): 971–991.
- Iverson, Elisabeth. 2008. "What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe?: Re-Examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases." *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (1): 3–23.
- Karreth, Johannes, Jonathan T. Polk, and Christopher S. Allen. 2013. "Catchall or Catch and Release? The Electoral Consequences of Social Democratic Parties' March to the Middle in Western Europe." *Comparative Political Studies* 46 (7): 791–822.
- Kitschelt, Herbert. 1994. *The Transformation of European Social Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Kitschelt, Herbert, and Anthony McGann. 1995. *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press.
- Kitschelt, Herbert, and Philipp Rehm. 2014. "Occupations as a Site of Political Preference Formation." *Comparative Political Studies* 47 (23): 1670–1706.
- Kriesi, Hans-Peter, Edgar Grande, Romain Lachat, Martin Dolezal, Simon Bornschie, and Timotheos Frey. 2008. *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kroknes, Veronica Fagerland, Tor Georg Jakobsen, and Lisa-Marie Grønning. 2015. "Economic Performance and Political Trust: The Impact of the Financial Crisis on European Citizens." *European Societies* 17 (5): 700–723.
- Lenz, Gabriel S. 2009. "Learning and Opinion Change, not Priming: Reconsidering the Priming Hypothesis." *American Journal of Political Science* 53 (4): 821–837.
- Lowe, Will, Kenneth Benoit, Mikhaylov Slava, and Michael Laver. 2011. "Scaling Policy Preferences from Coded Political Texts." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 36 (1): 123–155.
- Mader, Matthias, and Harald Schoen. 2019. "The European Refugee Crisis, Party Competition, and Voters' Responses in Germany." *West European Politics* 42 (1): 67–90.
- Margalit, Yotam. 2013. "Explaining Social Policy Preferences: Evidence from the Great Recession." *American Political Science Review* 107 (01): 80–103.
- Marx, Paul, and Elias Naumann. 2018. "Do Right-Wing Parties Foster Welfare Chauvinistic Attitudes? A Longitudinal Study of the 2015 'Refugee Crisis' in Germany." *Electoral Studies* 52: 111–116.
- McGann, Anthony, and Herbert Kitschelt. 2005. "The Radical Right in the Alps: Evolution of Support for the Swiss SVP and Austrian FPÖ." *Party Politics* 11 (2): 147–171.
- Meguid, Bonnie M. 2005. "Competition Between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success." *American Political Science Review* 99 (3): 347–359.
- Meguid, Bonnie M. 2008. *Party Competition Between Unequals: Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mudde, Cas. 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, Pippa. 2005. *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Oesch, Daniel. 2006. *Redrawing the Class Map: Stratification and Institutions in Britain, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oesch, Daniel, and Line Rennwald. 2018. "Electoral Competition in Europe's New Tripolar Political Space: Class Voting for the Left, Centre-Right and Radical Right." *European Journal of Political Research* 57 (4): 783–807.
- Pardos-Prado, Sergi. 2015. "How Can Mainstream Parties Prevent Niche Party Success? Center-Right Parties and the Immigration Issue." *The Journal of Politics* 77 (2): 352–367.
- Rovny, Jan. 2013. "Where do Radical Right Parties Stand? Position Blurring in Multidimensional Competition." *European Political Science Review* 5 (1): 1–26.
- Schumacher, G., and K. van Kersbergen. 2016. "Do Mainstream Parties Adapt to the Welfare Chauvinism of Populist Parties?" *Party Politics* 22 (3): 300–312.
- Tesler, Michael. 2015. "Priming Predispositions and Changing Policy Positions: An Account of When Mass Opinion is Primed or Changed." *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (4): 806–824.
- Thomassen, Jacques. 2005. "Introduction." Chapter 1 in *The European Voter: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, edited by Jacques Thomassen, 1–21. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wagner, Markus, and Thomas M. Meyer. 2017. "The Radical Right as Niche Parties? The Ideological Landscape of Party Systems in Western Europe 1980–2014." *Political Studies* 65 (1S): 84–107.
- Webb, Paul, and Tim Bale. 2014. "Why do Tories Defect to UKIP? Conservative Party Members and the Temptations of the Populist Radical Right." *Political Studies* 62 (4): 961–970.
- Wodak, Ruth. 2015. *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. London: Sage.

Copyright of Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.