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Three Decades of Populist Radical Right Parties in Western Europe: So What?

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Abstract. The populist radical right constitutes the most successful party family in postwar Western Europe. Many accounts in both academia and the media warn of the growing influence of populist radical right parties (PRRPs), the so-called '*verrechtsing*' (or right turn) of European politics, but few provide empirical evidence of it. This lecture provides a first comprehensive analysis of the alleged effects of the populist radical right on the people, parties, policies and polities of Western Europe. The conclusions are sobering. The effects are largely limited to the broader immigration issue, and even here PRRPs should be seen as *catalysts* rather than initiators, who are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the introduction of stricter immigration policies. The lecture ends by providing various explanations for the limited impact of PRRPs, but it is also argued that populist parties are not destined for success in opposition and failure in government. In fact, there are at least three reasons why PRRPs might increase their impact in the near future: the tabloidisation of political discourse; the aftermath of the economic crisis; and the learning curve of PRRPs. Even in the unlikely event that PRRPs will become major players in West European politics, it is unlikely that this will lead to a fundamental transformation of the political system. PRRPs are not a normal pathology of European democracy, unrelated to its basic values, but a pathological normalcy, which strives for the radicalisation of mainstream values.

Keywords: radical right; political parties; immigration; Western Europe

Introduction

It is forty-five years since Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan published their famous 'freezing hypothesis' of West European party systems (Lipset & Rokkan 1967).[1] While the thesis has been contested after nearly every electoral victory of a new party, or major defeat of an old party, Peter Mair (1997: 3) still concluded in the mid-1990s that 'the freezing hypothesis remains largely valid, at least up till now'. A lot has changed since Mair wrote those words. Of particular importance to this lecture, populist radical right parties (PRRPs)

have not only further increased their electoral support and parliamentary presence across Western Europe, they have also finally entered national governments.

Since the humble beginnings of the so-called 'third wave' of the radical right three decades ago (Von Beyme 1988), commentators have been warning of its dangers to European democracy. Asked by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* about the greatest risks for Europe, EU President Herman Van Rompuy said, referring explicitly to the *Vlaams Belang* in his native country, 'the big danger is populism' (Stabenow 2010). He said this in 2010, at the height of the biggest economic crisis in the postwar era!

The sense of a growing danger and influence of the populist radical right is not limited to political competitors, however. The media are full of articles about Europe's populist radical right being 'on the rise' (*The Guardian*, 6 November 2011) or, more dramatically, 'on the march' (*The Economist*, 17 March 2010), leading to 'Europe's drift to the right' (*Los Angeles Times*, 23 April 2002) and 'Europe's far right problem' (*CNN*, 26 July 2011).

The perceived importance of PRRPs can also be seen in the disproportionate academic attention devoted to them. While one is hard-pressed to find many non-German studies on the populist radical right before 1990, today more than a hundred scholars from across the globe work on the topic, and produce many more articles and books on this particular party family than on all other party families combined!

Most academics suggest, or claim outright, that the populist radical right is an important factor in contemporary European politics. They point to a broad range of developments that have caused PRRPs to move 'from the margins to the mainstream' of European politics, and which are allegedly caused by that move – from increased dissatisfaction with politics and racist violence at the mass level to the dominance of right-wing discourse and politics at the elite level. In most cases the evidence is illustrative at best, and correlation is taken for causation. To be fair, many effects are theoretically very difficult to prove, given that they relate to indirect effects or are dependent upon non-existent data.

Politicians and the media see the influence of PRRPs in the alleged '*verrechtsing*' or 'right turn' in European politics. They argue that PRRPs have pushed European politics to the right by directly or indirectly influencing the positions and salience of the issues on the political agenda. For example, Martin Schulz, leader of the Socialist Faction in the European Parliament, recently wrote that what worries him most about the recent rise of the populist radical right is not so much the extreme right violence, but 'the persistent, permanent breach of taboos that makes extreme right-wing ideology respectable by clothing it in the garb of democratic legitimacy' (Schulz 2011: 30).

The presence of PRRPs

PRRPs share a core ideology that includes the combination of (at least) nativism, authoritarianism and populism (see Mudde 2007). While virtually everyone agrees on the inclusion of some parties in this family – most notably the prototypical *Front National* (FN) in France – there is considerable debate on various others. In some cases this debate involves the point from which a party is (no longer) considered to be populist radical right.

Table 1 provides an overview of electoral results of the main PRRPs in Western Europe, listing both the highest and the most recent results in national parliamentary elections in the period 1980–2011. Despite some striking high and recent results, the alleged populist radical right 'wave' is clearly not lapping (equally) at the shores of all West European countries. In fact, PRRPs are represented in the national parliaments of just half of the 17 West European countries.

Table 1. Highest and latest electoral results of main PRRPs in Western Europe, 1980–2011

Country	Party	Highest result	Latest result
Austria	Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ)	10.7	10.7
	Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)	26.9	17.5
Belgium	Flemish Interest (VB)	12.0	7.8
	National Front (FNb)	2.3	–
Denmark	Danish People's Party (DFP)	13.8	12.3
Finland	None	–	–
France	National Front (FN)	15.3	4.3
Germany	The Republicans (REP)	2.1	0.4
Greece	Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS)	5.6	5.6
Ireland	None	–	–
Italy	Northern League (LN)	10.1	8.3
Luxembourg	National Movement (NB)	2.6	–
Netherlands	Party for Freedom (PVV)	15.5	15.5
Norway	None	–	–
Portugal	National Renovator Party (PNR)	0.3	0.3
Spain	National Front (FNe)	0.5	0.0
Sweden	Sweden Democrats (SD)	5.7	5.7
Switzerland	Swiss People's Party	28.9	26.6
United Kingdom	British National Party (BNP)	1.9	1.9

Source: Election Resources on the Internet: Western Europe, Manuel Álvarez-Rivera, http://electionresources.org/western.europe.html

Table 2. Average electoral results and official government participation of Greens and PRRPs in Western Europe (by decade)

	1980–1989	1990–1999	2000–2009
Average electoral result			
Populist radical right parties	1.7	4.8	5.9
Green parties	1.9	3.2	4.7
Government participation			
Populist radical right parties	0	1	7
Green parties	0	7	3

Source: Results of Green parties are taken from the official website of the European Greens: http://europeangreens.eu/menu/elections/election-results

Particularly insightful is a comparison with the Green party family, often considered the PRRP's mirror image. As Table 2 shows, the average score in national parliamentary elections of PRRPs is not much higher than that of the Greens. More surprising, perhaps, is that while they are slightly more successful in elections, they are slightly less successful in entering government, although this is changing. Since 1980 the Greens have taken part in ten governments, while PRRPs partook in only eight. However, while the 1990s were the highlight of Green governmental participation, the twenty-first century seems more favourable towards the populist radical right. In addition, PRRPs have been support parties of several minority governments.

All in all, populist radical right government participation remains a rarity in Western Europe. Indeed, of the more than 200 national governments that have been formed in Western Europe since 1980, a mere eight included a PRRP. In all cases it was a junior partner (see Table 3). While only three West European countries have had a majority government with official populist radical right participation (Austria, Italy and Switzerland),[2] and two had minority governments with their support (Denmark and the Netherlands), the trend is clearly up. In the 1980s there was no such government, in the 1990s only one (Berlusconi I), yet in the first decade of the twenty-first century there have been seven majority governments and three minority governments. Still, today, only one majority government includes a PRRP – the Swiss – while such a party officially supports the minority government in just one other country – the Netherlands.

All this does not mean that PRRPs are irrelevant in West European politics. The sheer fact that at least in electoral terms it is the most successful new European party family since the end of the Second World War warns against such a simplistic conclusion. At the same time, it should create some initial

Table 3. Populist radical right parties in West European national governments since 1980

Country	Party	Period	Coalition partner
Austria	FPÖ	2000–2002	ÖVP
	BZÖ	2002–2005	ÖVP
		2005–2007	ÖVP
Denmark*	DFP	2001–2005	V, KF
		2005–2007	V, KF
		2007–2011	V, KF
Greece	LAOS	2011–2012	ND, PASOK
Italy	LN	1994–1996	FI, CCD-UDC, AN
		2001–2005	FI, AN
		2008–2011	PdL
Netherlands*	PVV	2010–2012	CDA, VVD
Switzerland**	SVP	2000–	CVP, FDP, SP

Notes: * Minority governments in which the populist radical right functions as the official support party. ** Swiss governments are longstanding, voluntary governments based on a 'magic formula' rather than the outcome of the parliamentary elections. The SVP was excluded from government for a couple of months in 2008 because of internal divisions and a consequent split.

scepticism about the often alarmist claims of populist radical right influence in contemporary West European politics.

Assessing the impact of PRRPs

Commentators and scholars mostly assert the influence of the populist radical right. There is relatively little scholarly work that actually investigates this assertion empirically and systematically. Moreover, many studies focus on only one small aspect of the asserted effect – that is, immigration policies – and work with a limited, and often implicit, theoretical framework in which governmental parties are assumed to be if not the only, than at least the all-powerful actors in policy making. Finally, all scholars are faced with important case and data problems: there are few cases of large populist radical right parties, let alone governments with populist radical right participation, and we lack reliable comparative cross-national and cross-temporal data on many crucial aspects (most notably, public attitudes). Hence, most studies either feature only a limited number of countries and policy fields or use problematic data. This article, unfortunately, faces many of these same problems and can therefore only be considered a first stab at a comprehensive assessment.

I will assess the impact of the populist radical right on four aspects of West European politics: people, parties, policies and polities. The analysis is presented in that (democratic) order, assuming that the mostly oppositional populist radical right first influenced the people, leading to a response from the mainstream parties (worried about electoral competition), which introduced new policies (either in coalition with the populist radical right or not) and thereby possibly changing the whole political system.

People

According to the *verrechtsing* thesis, the rise of PRRPs has affected the European people by changing their issue positions and priorities. Charles Westin (2003: 123), for example, claims that: 'When protest parties such as the VB and FN receive a considerable share of the vote, the gravitational centre of public opinion is shifted significantly to the right.' In short, the parties, through their agenda-setting power (Minkenberg 2001), have increased the people's positions on and salience of 'populist radical right issues', such as immigration, crime, corruption and European integration.

It is clear that PRRPs profit from the increased salience of sociocultural issues, but this so-called 'silent revolution' (Inglehart 1977) largely predates the rise of the populist radical right. With regard to the more specific issues, there has been a clear increase of the salience of most of these – most notably immigration – in the past thirty years. However, the increase of salience is very volatile and seems hardly related to either the electoral strength or the government participation of PRRPs.

In some cases the changes in salience of the immigration issue seem to follow Christopher Wlezien's (1995) famous 'thermostatic model' – that is, growing public salience about immigration leads to electoral success of PRRPs, and to an increase in policy activity on immigration. This could be seen in Denmark, for example, where the salience of immigration rose sharply between 1990 and 2001 when the DFP achieved its electoral breakthrough, yet fell again in 2005 after the first period of DFP support for the minority government and a tightening of immigration laws (Meret 2011: 248).

In general, there is considerable debate about the effect of PRRPs on people's attitudes and issue positions, and scholarly studies only add to the confusion. Several studies claim a significant effect of PRRPs on attitudes towards immigration and integration at the mass level (e.g., Sprague-Jones 2011; Semyonov et al. 2006), but others find a more limited effect, for example only by 'cultural racist parties' (Wilkes et al. 2007) or 'entrepreneurial radical right-wing parties' (Williams 2006), or no significant effect at all

(e.g., Dunn & Singh 2011). While part of the confusion is undoubtedly based on the different aspects of the immigration issue on which the studies focus, as well as on the different data and time periods, it does not seem to indicate that electorally successful PRRPs cause fundamental changes in public attitudes on immigration and integration.

As PRRPs are often the most outspoken eurosceptic actor in their country, various commentators have linked the rise in public euroscepticism to the success of these parties (e.g., Krouwel & Abts 2007). While I am unaware of research that empirically proves the correlation, let alone the causation, there is ample empirical research on euroscepticism that points in a different direction. If one looks at public support for European integration across countries and times, as measured by the Eurobarometer, support fluctuates erratically and is seemingly unrelated to any electoral results. Moreover, at least since the Maastricht Treaty, there is a clear convergence in the decline in support for European integration across Europe (Eichenberg & Dalton 2007).

Cross-national data on attitudes related to crime are hard to find, and often have only limited data points. The Eurobarometer measured feelings of insecurity related to crime at three different times (1996, 2000 and 2002). The data point to a possible slight correlation with the electoral success of PRRPs, but not with their government participation. Other data are even more inconclusive, generally showing either quite stable positions or fairly erratic changes unrelated to electoral strength or government participation of the populist radical right (e.g., Van Dijk et al. 2006; Kesteren 2009).

Finally, one of the key points in the propaganda of PRRPs is that corrupt elites have hijacked the political system and silenced the voice of the people by making backroom deals and enforcing a conspiracy of silence. At first sight, it seems that they have been able to convince a growing part of the population. Western Europe has seen decreasing trust in political institutions and public satisfaction with national democracy. But much of the growth of popular dissatisfaction predates the rise of PRRPs, and probably caused it rather than being caused by it. Moreover, a quick look at Eurobarometer data shows that public satisfaction with national democracy is volatile and unrelated to the electoral success or governmental participation of PRRPs.

In conclusion, while PRRPs might have effected the position and salience of certain issues for some parts of the population, they seem to have rarely changed their more long-term attitudes. As I have argued elsewhere (Mudde 2010), they also didn't really need to, as the public attitudes of many Europeans were already in line with the basic tenets of the populist radical right ideology (even if in a more moderate form).

Parties

Regarding the party level, the argument of the *verrechtsing* thesis is twofold: mainstream parties have become more nativist, authoritarian and populist; and this is *because of* electoral competition from PRRPs. Most authors argue that populist radical right parties have only influenced mainstream right-wing parties. A good example is Jean-Yves Camus (2011: 83; see also Schain 2006), who argues that 'the FN's ideas . . . have had an influence on the political agenda of the right on issues such as immigration, law and order, multiculturalism and the definition of national identity'. Some politicised accounts go much further, claiming that the populist radical right influence can be seen across the political spectrum, at least from mainstream right to mainstream left.

At first glance, it seems the latter argument is most accurate, at least with regard to immigration policies (e.g., Van Spanje 2010). A recent comparative analysis of election manifestos showed that between 1975 and 2005 both the mainstream right and the mainstream left increased the salience of immigration and became stricter on the issue; the effect was most pronounced in the period 1995–2005 (Alonso & Claro da Fonseca 2012). However, while increased salience of the immigration issue is related to the presence of a relevant populist radical right party, the change to a stricter immigration policy is *not*. Or, more precisely, it is not for mainstream right-wing parties! In other words, in countries without a successful PRRP the mainstream left will stay away from immigration, but the mainstream right will adopt a strict(er) immigration policy anyway, seeing it as a promising electoral issue (see also Mudde 2007; Bale 2008). Interestingly, mainstream right-wing parties seem unaffected by coalition participation with the populist radical right too (Van Spanje 2010), meaning that their anti-immigration position precedes these coalitions, and actually enables them (see De Lange 2012).

It is important to remember that what is still generally referred to as the 'immigration issue' is actually a multifaceted complex of related but separate issues, including both immigration (including political asylum) and integration. Most research conflates the two, assuming that parties hold similar open or restrictive views on both issues, but this is not true. Looking at the platforms of the European party factions, Fraser Duncan and Steven Van Hecke conclude:

> While Christian Democrat and Conservative parties do not differ significantly from their Socialist equivalents on control issues, Liberal parties are less restrictionist. On integration, both Christian Democrats/Conservatives and Liberals are less multicultural than Socialist and Green parties. (Duncan & Van Hecke 2008: 432)

In other words, in those cases in which the populist radical right has been able to influence other parties on the broader immigration issue, it has been *across* the political spectrum on *immigration control* (mostly political asylum), yet only on the *right* side of the spectrum on *integration*.

Less research is available on other issues. The increased talk of law and order policies first by mainstream right-wing, and later also by mainstream left-wing parties, is often credited to competition with PRRPs. However, as authoritarianism is a broadly shared ideological feature, it probably was more the product of the conservative surge that started in the 1980s than of the rise of the populist radical right in the 1990s (see Ignazi 1992). More recently, the various terrorist attacks of the early twenty-first century and the consequent 'War on Terror' have been the most important factor in the securitisation of most aspects of politics (e.g., Haubrich 2003).

Finally, in line with my own argument concerning the emergence of a populist *Zeitgeist* (Mudde 2004), Gianpietro Mazzoleni (2008: 57) speaks of 'the 'populist contamination' of mainstream political discourse'. The argument is not that all political parties in Western Europe have become essentially populist parties, but that most parties use populist themes in their political discourse. The adoption of this 'soft populism' is not limited to mainstream parties in party systems with strong PRRPs. First, some other important populist parties in Europe operate in this respect as functional equivalents – most notably neoliberal populist parties like the Italian FI and the Norwegian FRP – but even in countries without any significant populist party, mainstream parties have adopted populist rhetoric. An oft-mentioned example is New Labour in Britain, particularly under Tony Blair (e.g., Mazzoleni 2008).

Policies

While comparative research is not available on all policy terrains, it seems clear that European politics has overall shifted to a more authoritarian direction, particularly in matters relating to immigration and integration as well as law and order and 'national security', since the 1980s. Policies shifted even further to the right after 9/11, which has led to the securitisation of various other policy fields, not least immigration. Hence, while some authors have demonstrated that governments with PRRPs have successfully pushed through their preferred policies on issues like immigration, integration and law and order, albeit with much more variation than is generally acknowledged (e.g., Akkerman & De Lange 2012), others have shown similar developments in countries without such parties in government, and sometimes even in parliament, indicating an EU-wide convergence of stricter immigration policies (e.g., Givens & Luedtke 2004; Schain 2009). Even if it is true that countries

with large PRRPs have introduced more 'populist radical right' legislation, these policy effects are at best *indirect* – that is, a reflection of shifts in the policy preferences of mainstream parties because of perceived electoral pressure from PRRPs (see above).

Most research on PRRPs in government focuses exclusively on immigration and integration policies, following Michael Minkenberg's (2001: 1) early conclusion that: 'When the radical right holds executive office, a "right turn" occurs primarily in cultural policies.' Andrej Zaslove, for example, argues that 'the Freedom Party and the Lega Nord have been *instrumental* in passing more restrictive immigration policy, limiting the flow of immigrants and the ability of non-EU-labour to live, work and settle permanently in either Austria or Italy' (Zaslove 2004: 99; emphasis added). PRRPs supporting minority governments seem to also have had their main successes in influencing immigration legislation (e.g., Meret 2011).

Many authors have cautioned against overly strong conclusions, arguing that against these successes on immigration stand many failures as well. They have noted only limited influence of PRRPs within their respective governments (e.g., Albertazzi 2008; Heinisch 2008; Luther 2011; Tarchi 2008). Reflecting on the policies of the Berlusconi governments in Italy, for example, Marco Tarchi (2008: 97) concludes that 'some of the issues which were held dear by the populist electorate were tackled, but in much more moderate terms than suggested by the parties' manifestos, especially that of the *Lega Nord*'. In short, the government record of the populist radical right does not look very impressive, even on their key issue of immigration (Akkerman 2012).

Polity

After the previous assessments, it should come as no surprise that PRRPs have not affected the type of polity in Western Europe. None of the European countries has become autocratic – not even those that have had PRRPs in government. This might seem self-evident today, but much of the academic and public interest in this party family has been sparked by the assumption that the populist radical right is a threat to the existing political system because of its alleged anti-democratic character.

Upon closer scrutiny, it is not that surprising that PRRPs have not changed the democratic nature of the system as they support both popular sovereignty and majority rule. Their relationship with liberal democracy is less supportive, however; they are essentially monist, highly sceptical about minority rights and the politics of compromise (Mudde 2007). And, in fact, in several cases they have tried to undermine the independence of counterbalancing political

institutions – most notably the courts and media – as well as to limit minority rights. However, the legal challenges were largely unsuccessful and the main onslaught was rhetorical.

Undoubtedly the most comprehensive challenge to liberal democracy in Western Europe has come from the various Berlusconi governments in Italy, albeit mostly at the initiative of the neoliberal populist FI rather than the populist radical right LN. Backed by his private media empire, Berlusconi has engaged in decades of populist rhetoric at the expense of the other parties, the courts and whoever opposed him. However, when his governments proposed controversial reforms of the political system which would give the prime minister in particular much greater powers, it failed or hardly changed the institutions (and practices) of the system as such (e.g., Ruzza & Fella 2009).

In short, while PRRPs have never challenged the bare essence of their democratic systems, this cannot be said of the fundamentals of *liberal* democracy. The fact that no country was turned into an 'illiberal democracy' (Zakaria 1997), not even when PRRPs were in government, is to be credited to the resilience of coalition parties, civil society and the courts. It is here that European democracies of the late twentieth century differ most strongly from those of the early twentieth century.

A turn to the right . . . but which right?

Minkenberg's apt summary of the essential impact of PRRPs on European democracies, based on a very limited set of cases and made over ten years ago, still holds good: 'The "government of the people, by the people, for the people" is not at stake, but the concept of the "people" is' (Minkenberg 2001: 21). As far as there has been influence of PRRPs on European democracies, it has been on redefining the people; or, more accurately, re-redefining the people in the manner that they had always been implicitly defined in the pre-multicultural society – namely as ethnically homogeneous. This influence has been mostly indirect and in line with the democratic process in the sense that PRRPs politicised mostly existing anti-immigrant sentiments in the population, which encouraged mainstream parties (if encouragement was needed) to adopt their issues and issue position, albeit in a more moderate form, and change policies accordingly (cf. Schain 2006).

However, although some PRRPs may be seen as *catalysts* in this process, they are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition. Their success was enabled by the pre-existence of a fertile breeding ground of popular resentment around immigration, crime and party politics across Western Europe (e.g., Betz 1994; Mudde 2010). This explains why countries without successful

PRRPs went through a roughly similar process. For example, surveys show a substantial rise in anti-immigrant sentiment in all European countries between 1988 and 2000 (Semyonov et al. 2006: 426), but the rise was steepest in the early period (1988–1994), which is just before the most pronounced shift towards a more anti-immigration position occurred among mainstream political parties across the continent (Alonso & Claro da Fonseca 2012).

In other words, mainstream right-wing parties are more responsible for the recent anti-immigration turn than PRRPs (Bale 2008). While all have moved to a more strict immigration and integration position, some have chosen to use this particular issue to gain governmental power by co-opting either the populist radical right parties (e.g., Austria, Denmark, Netherlands) or their voters (e.g., France). In most of these cases, the mainstream right adopted not just a more radical immigration position, but also implemented more strict immigration policies than in other countries. Finally, while electoral pressure from the populist radical right does have an effect on the position on immigration of mainstream left-wing parties, this is at least strongly mediated by the responses of mainstream right-wing parties (Bale et al. 2010). In short, the mere presence of a strong PRRP neither automatically leads to a more anti-immigrant position in a country nor does its absence guarantee liberal cosmopolitanism: politics matters – in particular the politics of mainstream right-wing parties (Bale 2008).

European integration, like immigration, was for long a taboo issue in European politics, often consciously excluded from the political agenda by the political elites. However, unlike immigration, European integration could for decades rely on a permissive consensus at the mass level. Since the early 1990s, however, popular support for European integration has decreased, sharply in some countries, even if outright rejection of the idea has increased more modestly. Mainstream parties have also become more cautious of European integration, increasingly expressing 'soft euroscepticism' within national politics (e.g., Szczerbiak & Taggart 2008), even if the permissive consensus remains largely intact at the elite level.

It is unlikely that PRRPs played an important role in the recent move towards more critical support of European integration. First, much of the critique is related to new developments within the EU, starting with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which partly challenge the preferred visions of European integration of mainstream parties and their supporters. In other words, as the EU has become more defined, more people and parties see particular things wrong with it. Second, most of the more outspoken eurosceptic parties today developed their position independent of, and often well before, the relevance of the populist radical right (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2008). And third, strong opposition to aspects of European integration comes at least as much from other

political actors – most notably radical left parties and trade unions (as was the case in the Dutch and French referendums on the 'European Constitution').

PRRPs have been even less relevant for the authoritarian turn in Western Europe. Like with immigration, there has always been a significant gap between the more progressive elites and the more conservative masses on law and order issues. The policy turn started in most countries in the 1980s as a consequence of neoconservative influence within the mainstream right (and sometimes left), well before the populist radical right started to gain significant electoral support. And while PRRPs have been strong supporters of strict anti-terrorism legislation, the post-9/11 securitisation of politics was broadly supported within the political mainstream and needed neither the initiative nor the support of them.

Related to their anti-establishment discourse, many PRRPs call for the introduction of plebiscitarian measures to 'democratise' the political systems and break the power of 'the corrupt political establishment' (Mudde 2007). They do not seem to have been very successful, or forceful, on this issue, however. While the number of national referenda in Western Europe has certainly increased, most were related to European integration and were either constitutionally required or the consequence of pressure from other political actors.

In short, while the *verrechtsing* thesis seems correct in terms of a move to more right-wing positions on the sociocultural dimension at the mass and elite level, it is wrong on the main cause of this process. Rather than the populist radical right, it has been the mainstream right-wing that has pushed West European politics to the right, in part in response to media and popular responses to relatively recent developments (such as multiethnic societies, the Maastricht Treaty and 9/11). In many cases, the mainstream left has proven either incompetent to halt the turn (e.g., integration) or remarkably collaborative in supporting it (e.g., immigration control, securitisation).

Explaining the limited impact of PRRPs

One of the main reasons for the limited impact of PRRPs is that they are mostly 'purifiers' rather than 'prophets' (Lucardie 2000). They push for policy changes on existing issues, not for new ones (like the Greens did with the environment). As argued above, on many issues the mainstream parties had already done much of the groundwork before PRRPs were strong enough to challenge them. A good example is the alleged new issue of immigration control. The space for manoeuver in this particular field was already significantly restricted before the third wave of the radical right even started. Most West European countries had already by and large banned economic

immigration in 1973–1974, as a response to the oil crisis, well before immigration control became politicised (in the late 1980s). These policies had largely been considered technical measures and were silently approved by political actors across the political spectrum (e.g., Rydgren 2008).

The most obvious reason, however, is the relatively modest electoral support that these parties generate in parliamentary elections. With an average support of less than 10 per cent of the electorate, few PRRPs are major players in their national political system. Moreover, even fewer make it into government, majority or minority, and most are shunned by the other parties in parliament. Hence, direct policy influence is already quite rare. And even when PRRPs make it into power, they are dogs that bark loud, but hardly ever bite.

There are at least five reasons for the governmental impotence of PRRPs. First, PRRPs focus on only a few issues, significantly reducing the scope of their impact, even if successful. Most importantly, socioeconomic issues are secondary to them, and are often log-rolled for sociocultural ones in negotiations with their coalition partners (De Lange 2012). Second, political parties are just one of many actors in creating policies; bureaucracies and nongovernmental actors severely limit the room to manoeuver for parties (see Duncan 2010). This is even more the case for new governmental parties, in particular of the populist radical right, which have few supporters in the major policy networks. Third, PRRPs are always junior parties in coalition, much less experienced than both their coalition partners and the other actors within the policy networks. Hence, they often have only nominal control of policy fields, even when they officially control the ministry (e.g., Heinisch 2008; Luther 2011). Fourth, coalition governments are the outcomes of processes of policy convergence between mainstream and populist radical right parties that predate the governmental cooperation (see De Lange 2012). Consequently, many governmental policies on even populist radical right issues like immigration reflect at least as much the programme of the mainstream right-wing party as that of the populist radical right one (e.g., Duncan 2010; Tarchi 2008). Fifth, and finally, PRRPs prefer to keep 'one foot in and one foot out' of government (Albertazzi et al. 2011: 479). Hence, they prefer to keep their oppositional image, by using radical rhetoric and pushing for excessively radical policies, rather than run the risk of being perceived as a 'normal' governmental party and part of 'the corrupt elite' (e.g., Luther 2011).

All is well on the Western front?

This all is not to say that PRRPs will always remain a relatively minor nuisance in West European democracies, although it is important to remember that in

the past three decades the main threats to liberal democracy have come from the political mainstream rather than the political extremes – that is, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, the Kaczynski brothers in Poland and currently Victor Orbán in Hungary, as well as from the anti-terror legislation after 9/11. This notwithstanding, it still is important to remain vigilant towards PRRPs. There are at least three reasons why they could become more influential in the (near) future.

First, partly because of their rise, but mostly because of the transformation of the mass media, we have seen a tabloidisation of political discourse in the past decades. Tabloids and PRRPs share many similar attitudes and issues, which have come to dominate the political discourse in Europe in the past decades (e.g., Mazzoleni 2008). While this does not necessarily translate into changing public attitudes and policy changes, it provides at the very least a more favourable 'discursive opportunity structure' (Koopmans & Statham 1999: 228) for PRRPs and their policies.

Second, the electoral trend of PRRPs is clearly up. Not only are there more successful parties today than thirty years ago, several have established themselves in their national political systems. And while the economic crisis has slowed down their electoral growth, by returning the political debate to socio-economic rather than sociocultural issues, there are good reasons to believe that the post-crisis era could see a resurgence of PRRPs. Most notably, the EU's response to the economic crisis has elevated anxieties about the inter-connectedness of the continent as well as further exposed the fundamental differences between most elites and most people on the desirability of further European and global integration. In many countries PRRPs have already responded by calling for varying degrees of disintegration, which might become more popular when people again feel more secure about the economy.

Third, and finally, some of the successful PRRPs have grown up. They have learned from mistakes during their first brushes with power and have often gained more experience at the sub-national level. Many observers have gen-eralised on the basis of just two cases – the Austrian FPÖ and the Dutch LPF – which both imploded when in office. However, this is by no means the general rule. The Italian LN survived three governments largely unscratched, while the Danish DFP and (probably) the Dutch PVV seem also unaffected by their support for minority governments (Akkerman & De Lange 2012).

I disagree, then, with the dominant strain in the populism literature that argues that populist parties are destined for success in opposition and failure in government (e.g., Heinisch 2003; Mény & Surel 2002). Like social demo-cratic parties before the Second World War, and Green parties in the 1990s, PRRPs can make the transformation from successful opposition party to effective governing party (see Luther 2011; McDonnell & Newell 2011).

Moreover, with mainstream parties increasingly converging with the populist radical right on sociocultural policies, and the latter continuing to compromise on socioeconomic issues, populist radical right parties may well remain the more attractive (i.e., 'cheaper') coalition partners for the mainstream right.

But even in the unlikely event that PRRPs become major players in West European politics, it is unlikely that this will lead to a fundamental transformation of the political system. After all, the populist radical right is not a normal pathology of European democracy, unrelated to its basic values, but rather a pathological normalcy, which strives for the radicalisation of mainstream values.

Notes

1. The Stein Rokkan Lecture was presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops in Antwerp, Belgium, on 11 April 2012. I want to thank Kris Deschouwer for delivering the lecture in my absence and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Markus Crepaz, Maryann Gallagher, Petr Kopecký, Sarah De Lange and Tim Bale for their valuable feedback on earlier versions.
2. LAOS was part of the Greek government for only two months. As soon as the first major decision had to be made by the new government – that is, approving a European bailout – the LAOS ministers defected from the party line and were kicked out of the party.

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