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What to do about right-wing populism?

Understanding right-wing populism and what to do about it

Daphne Halikiopoulou[1] and
Tim Vlandas[2]

The rise of right-wing populism in Europe

Since the early 2010s, right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) have been on the rise across Europe. In much of Western Europe, RWPPs such as the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the French Rassemblement National (RN), and the Italian Lega have gradually permeated mainstream ground, increasing their support beyond their secure voter base and becoming progressively embedded in the system either as coalition partners or as credible opposition parties. In Southern Europe, RWPPs are increasingly successful in countries such as Spain, Portugal, and Cyprus that had formerly resisted the RWPP tide. In Central and Eastern Europe, previously mainstream parties including Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland have radicalised in government, increasingly adopting populist, illiberal, and authoritarian policy positions. Finally, in the Nordic countries, parties such as the Danish People's Party (DF), the Finns Party (PS), and the Sweden Democrats (SD) have also increased their electoral support, exerting substantial policy influence. These developments have in most cases taken place at the expense of the mainstream: while the average electoral score of RWPPs has been steadily increasing over time, support for both the mainstream left and right has declined.

This right-wing populist momentum sweeping Europe has three features. First, the successful electoral performance of parties pledging to restore national sovereignty and implement policies that consistently prioritise natives over immigrants. Many RWPPs have improved their electoral performance over time, although there remain important cross-national variations.

Second, the increasing entrenchment of these parties in their respective political systems through access to office. A substantial number of RWPPs have either recently governed or served as formal cooperation partners in

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right-wing minority governments. Examples abound: the Italian Lega, the Austrian FPÖ, the Polish PiS, the Hungarian Fidesz and the Danish DF. The so-called cordon sanitaire – the policy of marginalising extreme parties – has been breaking down even in countries where it had traditionally been effective.

Third, RWPPs' increasing ability to influence the policy agenda of other parties. RWPPs such as the RN and the SD have successfully competed in their domestic electoral systems, permeating mainstream ground and influencing the agendas of other parties. As a result, mainstream parties on the right and, in some instances, on the left have often adopted accommodative strategies – mainly regarding immigration.

"The importance of cultural values in shaping voting behaviour has led to an emerging, but only partly accurate, consensus that the increasing success of RWPPs may be best understood as a cultural backlash"

UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF RWPPs

What explains this phenomenon? Researchers and pundits alike tend to emphasise the political climate of RWPP normalisation and systemic entrenchment, where issues 'owned' by these parties are salient: immigration, nationalism, and cultural grievances. The importance of cultural values in shaping voting behaviour has led to an emerging, but only partly accurate, consensus that the increasing success of RWPPs may be best understood as a cultural backlash.[1] Such theories posit that in a post-material world, societies are divided not by 'haves' and 'have nots', but by those who support and those who reject multi-culturalism, cosmopolitanism, and globalisation. This 'cultural backlash' against multiple dimensions of globalisation defined by immigration scepticism translates into voting through support for RWPPs that own the immigration issue.

A sole focus on culture, however, overlooks three key issues.

1. The predictive power of economic concerns over immigration and the critical distinction between galvanising a core constituency on the one

1 See, for example, Norris P and Inglehart R (2019) *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and the rise of authoritarian-populism*, Cambridge University Press

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hand and mobilising more broadly beyond this core constituency on the other.[2]

2. The strategies RWPPs themselves are pursuing: RWPPs capitalise on multiple insecurities, including both cultural and economic, to shape voting behaviour.[3]
3. The role of social policies in mitigating those insecurities that drive RWPP support.[4,5]

PEOPLE, PARTIES, POLICIES

To address these issues, our new report examines the interplay between what we call the 'Three Ps': People, Parties and Policies[6].

"Immigration is neither necessarily nor exclusively a cultural issue"

People

How do cultural and economic grievances affect individuals' probability of voting for an RWPP? How are these grievances distributed among the RWPP electorate? We argue that immigration is neither necessarily nor exclusively a cultural issue.

Both cultural and economic concerns over immigration increase the likelihood of voting for an RWPP. However, while cultural concerns are often a stronger predictor of RWPP voting behaviour, this does not automatically mean that they matter more for RWPP success because people with economic concerns are often a numerically larger group. Many

2 Halikiopoulou D and Vlandas T (2020) 'When economic and cultural interests align: the anti-immigration voter coalitions driving far right party success in Europe', *European Political Science Review*, 12(4): 427–448

3 Halikiopoulou D and Vlandas T (2019) 'What is new and what is nationalist about Europe's new nationalism? Explaining the rise of the far right in Europe', *Nations and Nationalism*, 25(2): 409–434

4 Halikiopoulou D and Vlandas T (2016) 'Risks, Costs and Labour Markets: Explaining Cross-National Patterns of Far Right Party Success in European Parliament Elections', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54(3): 636–655

5 Vlandas T and Halikiopoulou D (2022) 'Welfare state policies and far right party support: moderating 'insecurity effects' among different social groups', *West European Politics*, 45(1): 24–49.

6 Halikiopoulou D and Vlandas T (2022) *Understanding right-wing populism and what to do about it*, Report with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, FES Regional Office for International Cooperation - Democracy of the Future. https://democracy.fes.de/topics/right-wing-populism

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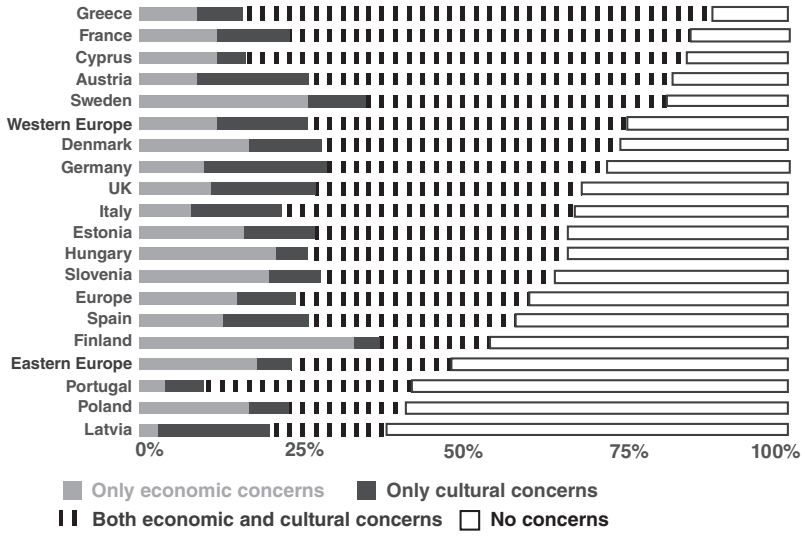
RWPP voters do not have exclusively cultural concerns over immigration as figure 1 shows.

This suggests we must distinguish between core and peripheral voter groups. Voters primarily concerned with the cultural impact of immigration are core RWPP voters. Although they might be highly likely to vote for RWPPs, they also tend to be a numerically small group. By contrast, voters that are primarily concerned with the economic impact of immigration are peripheral voters. They are also highly likely to vote for RWPPs, but in addition they are a numerically larger group. Since the interests and preferences of these two groups can differ, successful RWPPs tend to be those that are able to attract both groups.

What determines RWPP success is therefore the ability to mobilise a coalition of interests between core and peripheral voters; galvanising voters with cultural concerns over immigration, while mobilising economically concerned voters more broadly.

Figure 1: Distribution of immigration concerns (as a percentage of right-wing populist electorates)



Source: Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022

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"What determines RWPP success is therefore the ability to mobilise a coalition of interests between core and peripheral voters"

Parties

What strategies do RWPPs adopt to capitalise on their core and peripheral electorates? While we examine the success of parties that tend to be defined as 'right-wing populist', we are also sceptical about the analytical utility of the term 'populism' to explain the rise of this phenomenon. Instead, we emphasise the importance of nationalism as a mobilisation tool that has facilitated RWPP success.

European RWPPs have increasingly emphasised the 'national way of life'. RWPPs in Western Europe employ a civic nationalist normalisation strategy[7] that allows them to offer nationalist solutions to all types of insecurities that drive voting behaviour. This strategy has two features: one, it presents culture as a value issue and justifies exclusion on ideological grounds; and two, it focuses on social welfare and welfare chauvinism.[8] Central and Eastern European RWPPs, on the other hand, remain largely ethnic nationalist, focusing on biological criteria of national belonging and mobilising voters on socially conservative positions and a rejection of minority rights. Central and Eastern European RWPPs are also more likely to emphasise negative attitudes towards multiculturalism.

" To understand why some individuals vote for right-wing populist partiess, we should not only focus on their risk-driven grievances, but also on policies that may moderate these risks."

Policies

What type of policies can mitigate the economic risks driving different social groups to support RWPPs? European democracies have operated in a context of falling economic growth rates over the past decades, with recurrent economic crises in the 1970s, early 1990s, and from 2008

7 Halikiopoulou D, Mock S and Vasilopoulou S (2013) 'The civic zeitgeist', *Nations Natl*, 19: 107-127. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2012.00550.x

8 Jessoula M, Natili M and Pavolini E (2021) "Exclusionary welfarism': a new programmatic agenda for populist right-wing parties?', *Contemporary Politics*, DOI: 10.1080/13569775.2021.2011644

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onwards. Many advanced economies have, in time, recovered, but growth has often not returned to the level of previous decades. Many governments have liberalised and 'activated'[9] their labour markets often at the expense of a growing group of so-called labour market outsiders in precarious contracts.

In addition, accumulating debt is leading to a climate of permanent austerity while constraining the necessary physical and social investments that could underpin future growth. While economic developments obviously affect the life chances, insecurities and risks that individuals face, the degree of redistribution and the social insurance that developed welfare states provide shape the prevalence and political consequences of these developments.

Welfare state policies moderate a range of economic risks that individuals face. Our analysis illustrates that this reduces the likelihood of supporting RWPPs among insecure individuals – for example, the unemployed, pensioners, low-income workers, and employees on temporary contracts.

Our key point here is that political actors have agency and can shape political outcomes. To understand why some individuals vote for RWPPs, we should not only focus on their risk-driven grievances, but also on policies that may moderate these risks. This is consistent with a larger political economy literature documenting the protective effects of welfare state policies on insecurity and inequality.[10,11]

"in most cases, co-opting right-wing populist policy agendas is not a winning strategy for the centre-left"

CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Our analysis identifies regional patterns and different voter bases and grievances driving RWPP success across Europe. This suggests that there is no one single RWPP success formula. Progressive strategies addressing those necessarily face different obstacles depending on the context. For

9 Simoni M, Vlandas T (2021) 'Labour market liberalization and the rise of dualism in Europe as the interplay between governments, trade unions and the economy', *Soc Policy Adm*, 55: 637– 658. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12648

10 Barr N (2020) *The Economics of the Welfare State*, Oxford University Press

11 Hall P and Soskice D (2001) *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*, Oxford University Press.

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instance, the Western European centre-left has better chances of focussing on welfare expansion as an issue they 'own' than many counterparts in Central and Eastern Europe who have lost the ownership of those issues to RWPPs that promote distorted nationalist and chauvinist versions of similar ideas.

Overall, however, our analysis suggests that, in most cases, co-opting right-wing populist policy agendas is not a winning strategy for the centre-left. This finding is consistent with recent literature which suggests that the centre-left and RWPP electorates are considerably different,[12] and that centre-left repositioning towards RWPP restrictive immigration policies may attract a small number of RWPP voters but alienate a much larger proportion of their own voters.[13]

First, RWPP core voters (those voters who oppose immigration on principle and have strong and exclusive cultural concerns over immigration) are a minority in most European countries. These voters are principled RWPP voters and are unlikely to switch to the centre-left even if it adopts 'copycat' strategies. They identify more staunchly with a right-wing platform and are more likely to switch from 'far' to centre-right. They are the least likely centre-left constituency and therefore cannot constitute a centre-left target voter group.

Second, a comparison between the RWPP and centre-left voter profiles reveals considerable differences, especially in terms of the attitudinal profiles of centre-left voters. In terms of subjective attitudinal factors, cultural concerns over immigration make it less likely to vote centre-left parties in both Eastern and Western Europe, but economic concerns only play a role in the West. Trust in the EU similarly increases support for the left in both regions, while authoritarian attitudes play no role in either region, and religious practices are associated with lower support for the centre-left. In other words, existing centre-left voters are highly unlikely to be attracted to RWPP culturalist arguments and may abandon centre-left parties if they adopt such positions.

Third, even among the RWPP electorate, individuals with exclusively cultural concerns over immigration (core voters) are often a minority. The

12 Abou-Chadi T, Mittereger R and Mudde C (2021) *Left Behind by the working class? Social democracy's electoral crisis and the rise of the radical right*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

13 Chou W, Dancygier R, Egami N and Jamal AA (2021) 'Competing for Loyalists? How Party Positioning Affects Populist Radical Right Voting', *Comparative Political Studies*, 54(12): 2226–2260.

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RWPP electorate is composed of a significant percentage of people with either no immigration concerns or combined economic and cultural concerns. This suggests a large proportion of voters of these parties are protest or peripheral voters – voters whose opposition to immigration is contingent. Because these voters have salient inequality concerns – broadly defined to include declining social status or social mobility – and have no principled opposition to immigration, they can 'switch' to parties that emphasise issues related to equality and offer effective policy solutions to them.

Fourth, in most European countries the percentage of voters with immigration concerns among the centre-left electorate is rather low. The few that that do have immigration concerns are driven primarily by economic considerations. As such, their underlying frustrations could be understood as driven by inequality and material considerations and would likely switch if their economic concerns are met.

Centre-left parties should not be fooled into thinking they can simply copy the RWPP success playbook by going fully populist, embracing restrictive immigration policies, and competing on questions of national identity. Instead, they should appeal to the economic insecurities that many peripheral RWPP voters are concerned about, focussing on issues the centre-left 'owns' such as equality. After all, centre-left voters tend to be pro-immigration and a nationalist turn will likely alienate them. Successful centre-left strategies must attempt to galvanize the centre-left's core voter base by addressing the (economic) grievances that affect much larger parts of the *whole* electorate.

Daphne Halikiopoulou (PhD LSE) is professor of comparative politics at the University of Reading. She is interested in the far right, populism and nationalism and is the author of numerous articles on European far right parties. She is joint editor-in-chief of the journal *Nations and Nationalism*.

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