

Parliamentary Status and Drivers of Sympathy for the Radical Right

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[Correction added on March 6, 2024 after first online publication: The open materials badge and the respective section has been included in the article.]

Abstract

Demand-side research on the Radical right-wing populist parties (RRPPs) has highlighted anti-immigration attitudes, political dissatisfaction and their interaction as drivers of sympathy for them. Supply-side research studies the isolation that RRPPs often face in their respective parliaments. Linking these perspectives, we theorize and test whether cross-country differences in parliamentary isolation of an RRPP can predict differences in attitudinal associations. Conducting OLS regression analyses on 15 country samples, we find that that, beyond direct association with sympathy for RRPPs, the moderating term of anti-immigration attitudes and political dissatisfaction varies considerably across our samples. This variation is consistent with the parliamentary status of the RRPP in each country at the time of data collection. In predicting sympathy for RRPPs, these factors reinforce each other when the RRPPs is isolated in parliament; attenuate each other when the RRPP is in government; and are independent from one another when the RRPP has a history of government.

KEYWORDS

Anti-immigration attitudes, Parliamentary isolation, Political dissatisfaction, Radical right-wing populist parties

Zusammenfassung

Nachfrageseitige Forschung zu rechtspopulistischen Parteien hat immigrationsfeindliche Einstellungen, politische Unzufriedenheit und deren Interaktion als Faktoren hervorgehoben, die Sympathie für diese Parteien erklären. Angebotsseitige Forschung beschäftigt sich hingegen stärker mit der Isolation, mit

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der sich rechtspopulistische Parteien in ihren jeweiligen Parlamenten oft konfrontiert sehen. Wir integrieren beide Perspektiven und untersuchen, ob unterschiedliche Grade parlamentarischer Isolation rechtspopulistischer Parteien mit Unterschieden in den einstellungsbezogenen Faktoren, migrationsfeindliche Einstellungen und politische Unzufriedenheit, einhergehen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass neben den direkten Verbindungen der moderierte Effekt dieser Faktoren auf Sympathie für rechtspopulistische Parteien erheblich variiert. Diese Variation deckt sich mit der parlamentarischen Situation der jeweiligen rechtspopulistischen Partei zum Erhebungszeitpunkt. Sind die Parteien isoliert, verstärken sich immigrationsfeindliche Einstellungen und politische Unzufriedenheit gegenseitig; sind die Parteien an der Regierung beteiligt, schwächen diese Faktoren einander ab; und waren die Parteien früher an einer Regierung beteiligt, sind sie unabhängig voneinander.

Résumé

La recherche du côté de la demande sur le succès des partis populistes d'extrême droite (RRPPs) a souligné le rôle crucial des attitudes anti-immigration, du mécontentement politique, et de leur interaction, en tant que moteurs de sympathie pour eux. La recherche du côté de l'offre s'intéresse fortement à l'isolement auquel font face les RRPP dans leurs parlements respectifs. En reliant ces perspectives, nous étudions si des différences dans le degré d'isolement parlementaire d'un RRPP peuvent prédire des différences dans les associations attitudinales. Nous constatons que, au-delà des liens directs, les attitudes anti-immigration et le mécontentement politique varient considérablement dans leur association modérée avec la sympathie pour les RRPP. Cette variation correspond au statut du RRPP dans chaque pays: les attitudes anti-immigration et le mécontentement politique se renforcent mutuellement dans la prédiction de la sympathie pour les RRPP lorsque ces derniers sont isolés dans le parlement; s'atténuent lorsque le RRPP est au gouvernement; et sont indépendants lorsque le RRPP a une expérience gouvernementale.

Riassunto

La ricerca scientifica focalizzata sul lato della domanda riguardante il successo dei partiti populistici di estrema destra (RRPPs) ha evidenziato il ruolo cruciale delle attitudini anti-immigrazione, dell'insoddisfazione politica e della loro interazione. La ricerca focalizzata sul lato dell'offerta, invece, analizza l'isolamento che i RRPP affrontano nei rispettivi parlamenti. Collegando le due prospettive, questo articolo offre un contributo

teorico e empirico alla domanda in quale misura le differenze nel grado di isolamento parlamentare di un RRPP, nei vari paesi, possano predire le differenze nelle associazioni attitudinali. La nostra analisi, basata sulle regressioni OLP applicate a 15 paesi, rivela che – al di là dell’influenza diretta sul grado di simpatia per i RRPP – l’impatto dei due fattori (attitudini anti-immigrazione e l’insoddisfazione politica) varia considerevolmente da un paese all’altro. Questa variazione è confermata se si tiene conto dello status del RRPP in ciascun paese. In effetti, i due fattori si rafforzano reciprocamente quando i RRPP sono isolati nel parlamento, si attenuano quando il RRPP è al governo e sono indipendenti l’uno dall’altro quando il RRPP ha fatto parte del governo nel passato.

Many studies highlight the importance of anti-immigration attitudes and political discontent in predicting citizens' sympathy for radical right-wing populist parties (RRPPs) (Roodujin, 2018). On the supply side, RRPPs face unique challenges in many European countries' parliaments, as they are often isolated by a cordon sanitaire imposed by the remaining parties. However, little is known about how this affects voters' attitudes towards such parties. Here, we contribute to filling this gap by drawing on large-scale cross-national survey data. By combining the latter with data on the parliamentary inclusion of RRPPs, we are able to identify differences in attitudes towards RRPPs across countries.

Beyond the direct association of anti-immigration attitudes and political dissatisfaction with RRPP sympathy, we focus on the moderation between these concepts. Thus, we answer the question how political dissatisfaction is linked to issue-related party sympathy in different political contexts.

LINKING DEMAND-SIDE ATTITUDES WITH SUPPLY-SIDE CIRCUMSTANCES

On the supply side of party competition, RRPPs face unique challenges in many parliaments. Unlike mainstream parties, which occasionally alternate between opposition and government, RRPPs are sometimes isolated by a cordon sanitaire imposed by the rest of the parliament. This means that no other party will form a coalition with them and that other parties will often even refuse informal ties and support. A whole strand of research is devoted to understanding when and how such strategies are pursued by mainstream parties (Heinze, 2018), how they affect RRPPs (Krause et al., 2022; Rummens & Abts, 2010), as well as how they affect mainstream parties (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Gessler & Hunger, 2021). However, efforts to understand the association of an RRPP's standing with citizens' attitudes and sympathy for these parties on an individual basis rather than aggregated electoral outcomes are largely lacking (for an exception, see Han, 2020). This might be the case because the degree of RRPPs' inclusion in parliamentary processes varies strongly, which complicates cross-country comparisons. For this study, we propose to break down this variation in a concept labelled 'parliamentary status' with three categories: Isolation (also labelled 'cordon sanitaire' or 'pariah

status' (Moffitt, 2022), prior governmental participation, and to-date governmental participation. We acknowledge that this simplification widely ignores various facets of each category, e.g. whether isolation is limited to no coalition proclaims or also affects committees or media. However, this comparably distinct, universal and accessible reduction allows for clear cross-country comparisons.

At the demand-side, researchers have documented strong correlations between anti-immigration attitudes and sympathy for RRPPs (Rydgren, 2007), which is sometimes seen as a core ideology, a lowest common denominator that unites voters behind these parties (Roodujin, 2018). Political discontent is mostly linked to RRPPs through the 'protest vote' theory, which argues that citizens' disapproval of current policies makes them more likely to sympathize with RRPPs (Schmitt-Beck, 2017; Voogd & Dassonneville, 2020). It has also been shown that these factors can reinforce and moderate each other (Kleinert, 2021). Theoretically, this is based on the assumption that political issues, such as anti-immigration attitudes, are more salient predictors of party preferences for citizens who are dissatisfied with the incumbent government. But what if an RRPP is (or at least has been) part of the government? How does this affect these predictors and the interaction between them?

In this article, we link demand-side attitudes and supply-side circumstances to explain cross-country differences in predictors of sympathy for such parties. Following previous research and theory, we expect positive direct links¹ of anti-immigration attitudes with sympathy for RRPPs. However, for the protest vote effect of political dissatisfaction, we expect the link to be positive in countries where such parties are isolated ('protest vote') and negative when the RRPP is part of the government, implying that citizens who are satisfied with the government's performance also give credit to the governing parties. We then pay particular attention to a moderating term between anti-immigration attitudes and political dissatisfaction, the sign of which we expect to vary along with the parliamentary status of the RRPP in a given country: These attitudes should be mutually reinforcing when the party in question is isolated. If the party in question has participated in governments before, the interaction may be less pronounced, and finally, in the context of RRPP governments, the terms should attenuate each other.

To illustrate these premises, imagine a citizen with strong anti-immigration attitudes who is increasingly dissatisfied that the current government is not doing enough in his preferred direction. In search for alternatives, our concept of parliamentary status may implicitly be applied. Parties that advocate tough immigration policies *and* appear as the complete opposite of the incumbents (often in their self-portrayal, but also by competitors, which punish them with isolation) may seem like a promising alternative. However, parties that had been in government before may be less attractive, as high expectations may have been disappointed before. Finally, RRPPs that are currently in government are obviously not the right choice for someone who is disappointed with current policies. Isolated parties may therefore benefit from their status in the sense that political dissatisfaction is associated with greater salience of a main motive - anti-immigration attitudes - for sympathizing with them. For parties that have been part of governments in the recent past, this effect becomes less relevant, and for the currently ruling RRPP, citizens with higher levels of political dissatisfaction should be less likely to sympathize with this party, but also have a weaker link of anti-immigration attitudes in predicting their sympathy for it.

¹We acknowledge the limitations of our research design. Our study is based on cross-sectional survey data and all our results correlational only. Yet, our theory suggests temporal sequence. We believe that convincing arguments are given for this expectation, however we cannot rule out risks associated with unmeasured confounders and reversed causality. We therefore refrain from using causal language.

DATA AND ANALYTIC STRATEGY

To test our assumptions, we combine data from different sources and countries. Detailed information on variables, parties and descriptive statistics can be found in the [online appendix](#). Survey data were chosen primarily for the availability of a metric sympathy scale for parties and other items to represent our theoretical constructs. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES; CSES, 2021) and the RECONNECT survey (abbreviated as REC; Plescia et al., 2020) met our criteria. Combined and filtered for countries where critical items were not asked, we were left with 15 national samples.²

The operationalization of our theoretical constructs was guided by theoretical arguments and common practice. Anti-immigration attitudes are an equally weighted index of three items in both datasets. Following common definitions (Torcal, 2011), political dissatisfaction is represented by a single indicator asking about satisfaction with the current national government. In contrast to much of the existing literature, our dependent variable is a sympathy scale for the most relevant RRPP of the respective country. Note that these scales allow the respondent to indicate a general preference for an RRPP, independent of voting intentions (Gschwend et al., 2018). As these scales do not force respondents to select only one party, they allow researchers to identify also respondents who would not anymore or not yet vote for the RRPP but have general sympathy for the RRPP and therefore may be volatile in their reported voting intention. This subtle distinction is useful because it makes the sympathy scale appear more robust to changes in external conditions, which influence citizens' voting intentions (e.g. thresholds, relative strength, coalition signals; cf. van der Eijk et al., 2006). Within our sample, we also witness the case that a party switches from opposition to government between two observations. Along with this change voters may change their voting intention against (as an important hurdle to exerting political influence has been overcome) or in favor of the party (to align with the winners, 'bandwagon effect'), but it appears less likely that their general sympathy changes due to that switch. To identify the 'most relevant RRPP in each country', from PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2019), we took the one that obtained the largest vote share in the last election before the survey. 'Parliamentary status' was determined using ParlGov dataset (Döring et al., 2022). In all analyses we also used common socio-demographic variables as controls.

We employ these cross-sectional, cross-national datasets in OLS models. Prior to their estimation, we standardized all variables and computed the index of anti-immigration attitudes. The models include the interaction term between anti-immigration attitudes and political dissatisfaction and the regression of all variables on the respondent's sympathy for the RRPP.

RESULTS

At the individual level, we find strong support for both of our theoretically relevant variables (Figure 1). Association of anti-immigration attitudes with RRPP sympathy is positive in all countries except Poland and Hungary (REC). Although the RRPPs in these countries (PiS and Fidesz) also express strong anti-immigration sentiments, these parties are also majority parties supported by a broad and diverse part of the electorate. Therefore, individual issues may be less relevant for their voters. In general, estimates for anti-immigration attitudes appear

²For the case of Belgium, preliminary analyses reveal that some parties listed by PopuList are negatively related to anti-immigration attitudes, thereby questioning established characteristics of RRPPs. The unique party system of Belgium with its strong regional/autonomy cleavage may overlay the cleavage of immigration. We therefore regard it as justified to exclude Belgium from our analyses.

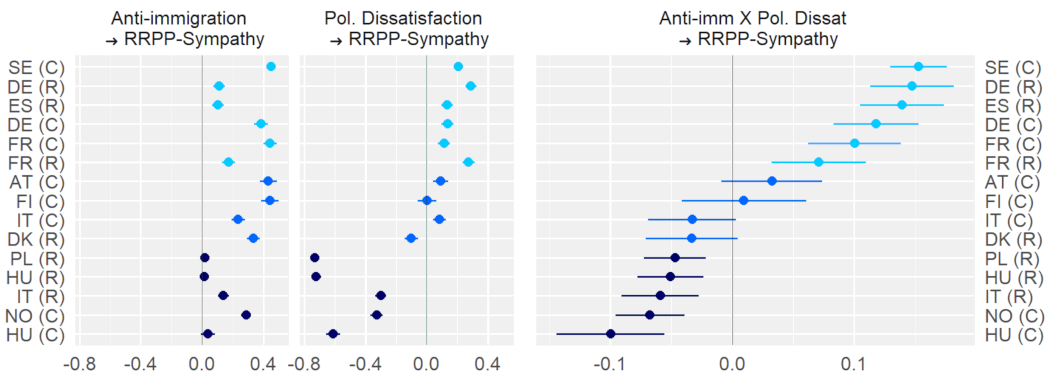


FIGURE 1 Forest plot: Forest plot of coefficients by variable and country. Order of countries follows parliamentary status and strength of the interaction. Light blue=RRPP is isolated; dark blue=RRPP was previously part of a cabinet or supported a minority government; purple=RRPP is in government. (C)=CSES, (R)=RECONNECT. Generated with ggplot2 (Wickham, 2016).

stronger in the CSES dataset than in the REC dataset. This may be related to the different items included in the measurement of this construct.

Regarding political dissatisfaction, the results are more stratified, ranging from strong positive to strong negative associations with RRPP sympathy. This variation is in line with our expectations: We find strong positive links for isolated parties, links close to zero when the RRPP used to govern, and negative ones when the RRPP is currently in government. This supports our expectation that satisfaction with the government is strongly associated with sympathy for the governing parties.

We now turn to the interaction term of political dissatisfaction and anti-immigration attitudes predicting RRPP sympathy. The results above suggest it is worth taking the parliamentary status perspective into account when interpreting cross-country differences. Indeed, we find strong support for our hypothesis that the positive association of the interaction term with RRPP sympathy varies with the party's parliamentary status. For our sample of countries, RRPPs were isolated at the time of the survey in Germany, France, Sweden, and Spain. It is precisely – and only – in these countries that we find positive (reinforcing) links of the moderator. This is also depicted in Figure 2, where the predictions for different levels of anti-immigration attitudes spread out with higher levels of political dissatisfaction. The RRPPs in Austria, Finland, Denmark, and Italy (CSES) were not part of the current government but of previous ones. In this group of countries the interaction term is insignificant. In Norway, Hungary, Poland, and Italy (REC) the RRPPs were in government during the field period. Here, greater political dissatisfaction is linked to lower estimates of anti-immigration attitudes and the linear predictions move closer together towards the right side of the graph.

Note that the unstandardized sympathy scales in Figure 2 allow interpreting the practical relevance of these results. In the upper row, especially in Germany and France, predicted values span across nearly half of the sympathy scale. In the center row differences are comparably weak, while in the lower row, mainly Poland and Hungary, our models yield predictions nearly across the whole spectrum.

The cases of Italy and Denmark are particularly interesting. Italy is the only country for which we can make a comparison between different statuses of the RRPP. The Lega party was part of previous governments, but not of the current one, when data for the CSES was collected. Shortly thereafter - and during field phase of the REC dataset - it was a major participant in the government. With this switch from opposition to government benches, the moderation term for Italy also moves from narrowly insignificant to strong and significantly negative in our models. Denmark (REC) stands out as a bit odd, fitting our

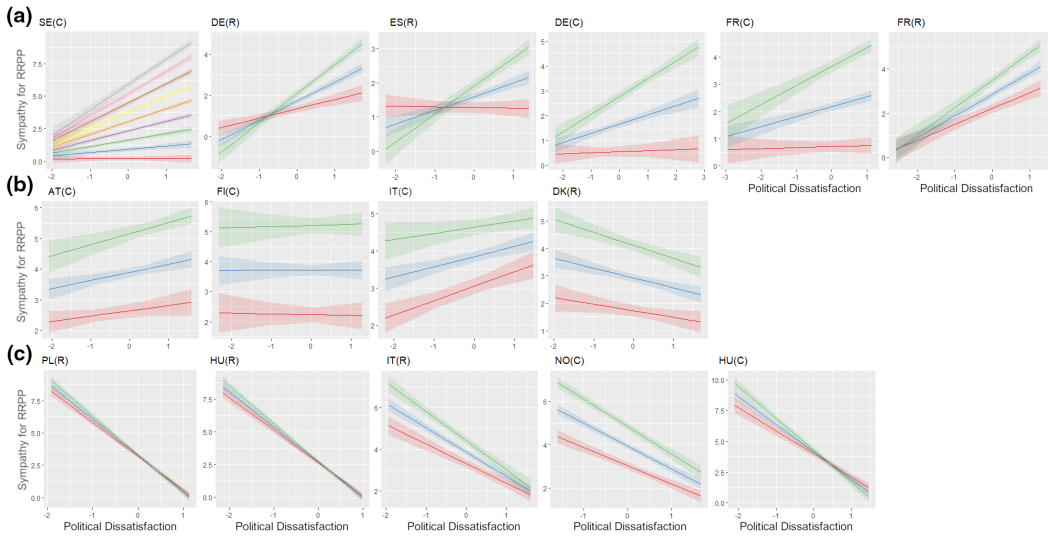


FIGURE 2 Visualization of interaction terms: Plots showing predicted unstandardized RRPP sympathy (0–10) for different levels of political dissatisfaction and anti-immigration attitudes (blue = arithmetic mean, red = mean-1SD, green = mean + 1SD). For Sweden (C), the index is missing one variable, so it has only nine levels, all of which are shown (red = lowest, gray = highest). Countries are arranged in rows according to the status of the RRPP: Top row, (a) RRPP is isolated in this country; middle row, (b) RRPP was previously part of a cabinet or supported a minority government; bottom row, (c) RRPP is in government. (C) = CSES, (R) = RECONNECT. Plotted with sjPlot (Lüdecke, 2023).

predicted scheme only by a small margin and showing a negative link for political dissatisfaction, implying that those who were more satisfied with the government's performance were also more likely to report positive evaluations of the RRPP. The party in question, 'Dansk Folkeparti', was not formally part of the government, but informally supported a right-wing government during the period of data collection, and thus has a unique and exceptional status among the parties in our data sets. Therefore, this case fits both theoretically and empirically between the two levels we formally specified (not in government but also not isolated vs. in government).

Taken together, these results suggest that the degree of parliamentary exclusion or inclusion, a supply-side factor, is strongly linked to differences in demand-side predictors of party sympathy. Consistent with previous research, anti-immigration attitudes emerge as nearly universally associated with higher RRPP sympathy. Results for political dissatisfaction are mixed. As expected, RRPP sympathizers also tend to approve of the government when the RRPP is part of it and tend to disapprove when the RRPP is not part of it. We also find that these variables' interaction varies with the party's parliamentary status. Strong political dissatisfaction is linked to greater coefficients of anti-immigration attitudes only in countries where these parties are isolated. When the party is not isolated, but also not part of the current government, these variables are rather independent, resulting in an insignificant moderation term. In countries where the RRPP is in government, higher dissatisfaction is actually associated with a decrease in the predictive power of anti-immigration attitudes for RRPP sympathy. We conducted sensitivity analyses to test for the potential that unobserved confounders distort our results, which are reported in our appendix in more detail. These analyses show that it appears rather unlikely that our associations are overturned by an unobserved confounder although we cannot completely dismiss this possibility.

CONCLUSION

We argued that the interaction of well-known demand-side predictors of RRPP sympathy, anti-immigration attitudes and political dissatisfaction, may be correlated with parliamentary status of the RRPP. Our results from two data sets and 15 unique country observations support this view. Political discontent and anti-immigration attitudes reinforce each other in their prediction of sympathy for an RRPP in isolation. However, when the RRPP is in government, the predictors work against each other. When the RRPP was in government before but not at the time, the links are independent of each other. These results add to the vivid and relevant body of research investigating incumbent parties' strategies for dealing with RRPPs in parliament. In line with recent research (Han, 2020; Muis et al., 2021), we show that beyond links of competitors' isolation, adaptation, and accompanying strategies with electoral outcomes at the macro level (Pauwels, 2011), they also appear to be linked to individual level attitudes that are highly relevant in predicting RRPP sympathy.

Although our results appear quite robust, we acknowledge the typical shortcomings of cross-sectional analyses, i.e. that we are not able to establish temporal precedence of our concepts. In addition, we strongly simplified parliamentary practice to only three levels and also ignored how competing RRPPs (Gessler et al., 2022) affect our results, which might be promising paths for future research.

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OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned Open Materials badges for making publicly available the digitally-shareable data necessary to reproduce the reported results. The data is available at <https://doi.org/10.11587/MOV0EZ>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at AUSSDA at <https://doi.org/10.11587/MOV0EZ> and at the CSES website at <https://doi.org/10.7804/cses.module5.2022-03-01>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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