



# Support for radical parties in Western Europe: Structural conflicts and political dynamics

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## ABSTRACT

Why is the populist radical left and right on the rise across western Europe? Integrating theories on changing socio-political conflict with arguments about crises of political representation, we contend that electoral support for radical right and radical left parties is rooted in two distinct sets of socio-structural factors, but their translation into electoral choice is in both cases conditioned by the individual political discontent that originates in specific political dynamics. Relying on the European Social Survey (ESS) covering the period from 2002 to 2016 and ParlGov data, we show that the lack of responsiveness of mainstream parties to the changing social conflict structure provides critical opportunities for new challengers from both the radical left and the radical right, while voters' political discontent only works to heighten their success when these parties are in opposition. Our article contributes not only by offering an integrative account of the electoral appeal of the radical right and radical left parties. In emphasising the largely similar nature of short-term, political factors that condition the translation of the different sets of long-term, structural determinants into opting for these parties, critically, this article also contributes to understanding the electoral success of radical challengers across western Europe.

## 1. Introduction

There is no lack of explanatory schemes for the surge and the success of radical challenger parties in western Europe (e.g. Eatwell, 2003; Kitschelt, 2007; Rooduijn and Burgoon, 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2017; Rydgren, 2007; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018). While these studies offer important insights into the socio-structural characteristics of the constituencies of radical parties both from the right and the left, scholars have only recently started to investigate how these structural determinants of the vote for such challengers relate to and interact with the political determinants of challenger party support. This article argues that support for radical right and radical left actors is deeply rooted in two distinct types of socio-structural conflicts, but their translation into electoral choice is conditioned by the same kind of individual political discontent originating from political dynamics. More specifically, we contend that the vote for parties of both the radical right and the radical left is principally motivated by distinct sets of underlying substantive grievances, which are rooted in socio-structural transformations of society. By contrast, the political discontent that arises from the tensions linked to their inadequate representation in the political system

by mainstream parties is strictly politically motivated. This political discontent is at the origin of what is usually called 'populism', and it is both expressed and fueled by challengers from the radical left and the radical right (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2016).

In this paper, we do not go into the details of the origins of the political discontent. Instead, we argue that voters' political disaffection over the insufficient representation of their concerns may additionally motivate a vote for both radical left and radical right parties, and that this effect crucially depends on whether the radical challengers participate in government or not, and on the degree to which they have become an established political force.

To advance this argument, we first discuss the two sets of factors which shape the vote for challenger parties in the light of the literature. Second, we introduce the data and operationalization used to test our theoretical assumptions, relying on the European Social Survey (ESS) covering the period of 2002–2016 and ParlGov data (Döring and Manow, 2018) to estimate the impact of the determinants on the vote choice for the different types of radical parties. Third, we present the results and finally, we conclude by discussing their implications for the surge of populism in western Europe. Our article contributes not only by offering

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an integrative account of the electoral appeal of the radical right and the radical left parties. In emphasising the largely similar nature of short-term, political factors that condition the translation of the different sets of long-term, structural underpinnings of electoral choice for these parties, critically, this article also contributes to understanding electoral success of radical challengers across western Europe.

## 2. Two sets of factors shaping the vote for challenger parties

### 2.1. The long-term factors associated with the vote for challenger parties

According to a Rokkanean perspective, vote choice is essentially structured by broad societal conflicts. In western Europe, these conflicts were traditionally linked to religion and class, as well as to centre-periphery divisions. More recently, we have seen the rise of a new structural conflict linked to processes of globalization or 'denationalization' (Zürn, 1999), which can be understood as the opening-up of economic, cultural, and political national borders and which have started to accelerate since the late 1980s. A number of scholars argue that processes related to increasing international economic competition, the increasing influx of migrants from ever more distant and culturally more different shores, and the increasing political integration in the European Union have created conflicts between 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization, i.e. between people whose life chances were traditionally protected by national boundaries and who perceive the weakening of these boundaries as a threat to their social status and their social security, and people whose life chances are enhanced by the opening up of national borders. Scholars have used different labels to refer to the new structuring conflict – from 'GAL-TAN' (Hooghe et al., 2002), 'integration-demarcation' (Kriesi et al. 2008), 'universalism-communitarianism' (Bornschieer, 2010), 'cosmopolitanism-communitarianism' (De Wilde et al. 2019; Zürn and De Wilde, 2016), 'cosmopolitanism-parochialism' (De Vries, 2018) to the 'transnational cleavage' (Hooghe and Marks, 2018). They agree, however, that the new divide is above all articulated based on two types of issues: immigration and European integration. For multiple reasons – programmatic constraints, internal divisions or incumbency, the mobilization potentials that were created by this new conflict were neglected and avoided by the mainstream parties (De Vries and Van De Wardt, 2011; Green-Pedersen, 2012; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Netjes and Binnema, 2007; Sitter, 2001; Steenbergen and Scott, 2004). Consequently, voters turned to new parties with distinctive profiles for their articulation. Over the past decades, it has been mainly the parties of the radical right which have mobilized the heterogeneous set of the losers of globalization (Kriesi et al. 2008, 2012) and their concerns about immigration and European integration. These parties all endorse a xenophobic form of nationalism that can be called 'nativist' (Mudde, 2007), claiming that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the 'nation'). Accordingly, the vote for these parties has been shown to be above all an anti-immigration vote (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Oesch, 2008), and, to some extent a vote against Europe (Schulte-Cloos, 2018; Werts et al., 2013) and against the cultural liberalism of the left that has increasingly shaped western societies (Ignazi, 2003; Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

These radical right parties rose mainly in northwestern Europe. They have become an established force in the national party systems of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland already before the turn of the century. In other north-western European countries – Finland, Germany, Sweden, and the UK – they have, for various reasons, broken through only more recently. In southern Europe, up to the most recent past, with the exception of the Lega Nord (Betz, 1993), radical right parties have not been able to get a foot on the ground. The impact of the new conflict has been more limited in the countries of southern Europe – for reasons that have to do with their political legacy (long-lasting authoritarian regimes and strong communist parties, i.e. a strong 'old' left) and with the fact that they had been emigration countries until more recently. However, under the

impact of the combined economic and political crises that shook southern Europe in the more recent past (Hutter et al. 2018), new parties of the radical left have surged in Greece, Spain and (to a more limited extent) in Portugal.

Contrary to the radical right, the radical left is more heterogeneous. It is divided into a traditional section (the surviving communist parties and democratic socialist parties like the Dutch SP, the Spanish Podemos and the Greek Syriza) and a new left section which adopts a 'red-green' position (the Nordic Green Left, die Linke, the Portuguese Left Bloc, and the Spanish IU since 1989) (Gomez et al., 2016; Keith and March, 2016). What unites the two sections of the radical left is the rejection of the socio-economic structure of contemporary capitalism and the pursuit of an alternative economic and power structure involving a major redistribution of resources (March, 2012, 8). While the radical right mainly focuses on the reshaped cultural dimension, the radical left focuses on the economic dimension of the two-dimensional space of party competition. Thus, although it shares the Euroscepticism of the radical right, the radical left mobilizes economic anxieties and anti-austerity concerns against the European project, while the radical right's Euroscepticism is based on national identity considerations and feelings of cultural threat (De Vries and Edwards, 2009). On the cultural dimension, the radical left shares the traditional cosmopolitanism of the left and supports both immigration and cultural liberalism. In other words, with respect to the new conflict about the nation-state, the radical left occupies a partially contradictory position, advocating an inclusionary and egalitarian internationalism (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019; Keith and March, 2016). Consequently, the vote for the radical left has been shown to be mainly determined by egalitarian economic attitudes on social and redistributive policies and by culturally liberal, multi-cultural and somewhat Eurosceptic positions (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Rooduijn and Burgoon, 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2016).

As a result of the mobilization by the new challengers from the radical right and the radical left, new patterns of class voting coexist with old ones (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). Old patterns, opposing the working class to the old middle class as well as managers and technocrats, are structured by economic conflicts, while new patterns are mainly structured by cultural conflicts. In line with these new patterns, the working class's cultural conservatism has been mobilized by the radical right, and the new middle class's cultural liberalism has driven it to the left. Thus, radical right support has been shown to be strongest among production workers, small business owners, and to some extent service workers (Ares, 2017; Bornschieer and Kriesi, 2012; Oesch, 2008, 2012), whereas support for left-wing parties has been rising among middle-class voters. Social-cultural professionals are by now least likely to vote for the radical right, but most likely to vote for the Greens and the radical and moderate left (Ares, 2017; Gingrich and Häusermann, 2015; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015). Importantly, education has reinforced these opposing trends, since highly educated voters tend to be culturally more liberal than less educated voters. There is also some continuity in structural terms, since, controlling for education, van der Waal, Achterberg, and Houtman find a reinforcement of the old pattern of class voting in terms of income, i.e. an increasing trend across the years for the high income groups to cast a rightist vote, and for the low income groups to cast a leftist vote. Finally, subjective social status threat and relative deprivation have been shown to influence the vote for radical parties (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Mayer et al., 2015; Rooduijn and Burgoon, 2018), too: people who are threatened by status loss and economic uncertainty are more likely to vote for radical parties from both left and right.

The vote for the radical left and the radical right is, thus, structurally rooted and determined by long-term substantive concerns related to individuals' class, education and income, and driven by their subjective status threats. While the key substantive demands for the radical right vote are opposition to immigration, European integration and cultural liberalism, the key substantive demands of the radical left vote are economic egalitarianism, the promotion of state intervention in the

economy, and the support of cultural liberalism. Thus, the radical right is articulating the new structural demarcation-integration conflict, while the radical left is articulating a renewed version of the old class conflict. We expect the impact of the key substantive demands related to these two fundamental conflicts to constitute a stable force of change over time and to apply respectively to all radical right and left parties, independently of the specific political context conditions under which they operate (H1). As is illustrated by Fig. 1, which summarizes our theoretical argument, political discontent is expected to have an additive effect to these structural effects. This additional effect is expected to vary according to the challengers' status as we shall explain in the next section.

## 2.2. The differential impact of political discontent

Radical right parties are typically associated with populism, i.e. they are usually considered to express not only the substantive concerns linked to the new social conflicts in society, but also dissatisfaction with the established political elites (Mudde, 2007). In other words, these new challengers express both the *substantive demands* of voters that have not been taken into account by the mainstream parties and their *political discontent* with the way the political system works in their own country. While their 'host' ideology connects these parties to the fundamental structural conflicts in society, the 'thin' populist 'ideology' connects them to the political sphere and to the political discontent of their constituencies. More specifically, the populist 'ideology' refers to the tension between 'the elites' and 'the people'. This 'ideology' puts the emphasis on the fundamental role of 'the people' in politics, claims that 'the people' have been betrayed by 'the elites' in charge who are abusing their position of power, and demands that the sovereignty of the people be restored (Mény and Surel, 2002, 11f; Mudde, 2004). As a matter of fact, populist parties pursue a *double logic* (Rooduijn et al., 2016: 34): they not only express the substantive concerns and the political discontent of the voters in question, their populist rhetoric also contributes to their voters' populist discontent. Accordingly, based on Dutch panel data, Rooduijn et al. (2016) find a reciprocal reinforcement of political discontent and populist voting. Similarly, based on Belgian panel data, Hooghe and Dassonneville (2018, 126) observe a 'spiral of distrust', where low levels and decreasing levels of political trust increase the probability of voting for a populist party, while having chosen

such a party increases distrust even further.

In their analysis of the vote for radical right parties in 16 Western European countries in the 1990s, Lubbers et al. (2002) have shown that this vote is enhanced by political dissatisfaction. More recently, Akkerman et al. (2014, 2017) have shown for the Netherlands that individuals with pronounced populist attitudes are more likely to vote for populist parties from the right (PVV) and the left (SP), a result that is confirmed by the cross-national study in nine European countries by van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018). However, studies that have analysed the radical right vote for individual countries have found that political dissatisfaction *per se* does not consistently contribute to the radical right vote – in some countries it does, in others it does not (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Oesch, 2008; Rooduijn, 2018). Other authors have even contested that a vote for the radical right is a protest vote and maintained that the vote for the successful parties of the radical right instead is determined by substantive considerations only (van der Brug and Fennema, 2003; van der Brug et al., 2005).

We contend that these inconsistent results derive from the fact that the association of political discontent with the vote for parties of both the radical right and the radical left is not only conditioned by the characteristics of the radical challenger parties, but, crucially, also by the specific political opportunity structure they are facing.

First of all, we argue that political dissatisfaction is likely to be less important for the support of radical parties which are part of the government. Not only are voters of governing parties more satisfied with democracy than voters of parties that have lost a recent election and find themselves in the opposition (Anderson, 2005). The inclusion in the government is also likely to incite radical parties to moderate their policy positions and their rhetoric, because they typically have to accommodate themselves to their coalition partners in western European party systems (Akkerman et al., 2016, 15; Krause and Wagner, 2019). When the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in 2000, for instance, entered the government dominated by Wolfgang Schüssel's Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), its cabinet members moderated their positions. This led to the collapse of the party's vote share and to an eventual split between the moderates and the radicals with the moderates creating a new party, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) (Luther, 2015, 143–145). Similarly, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) moderated its populist discourse once its leader was coopted into the government in 2003, and it also split over the government experience of its leader

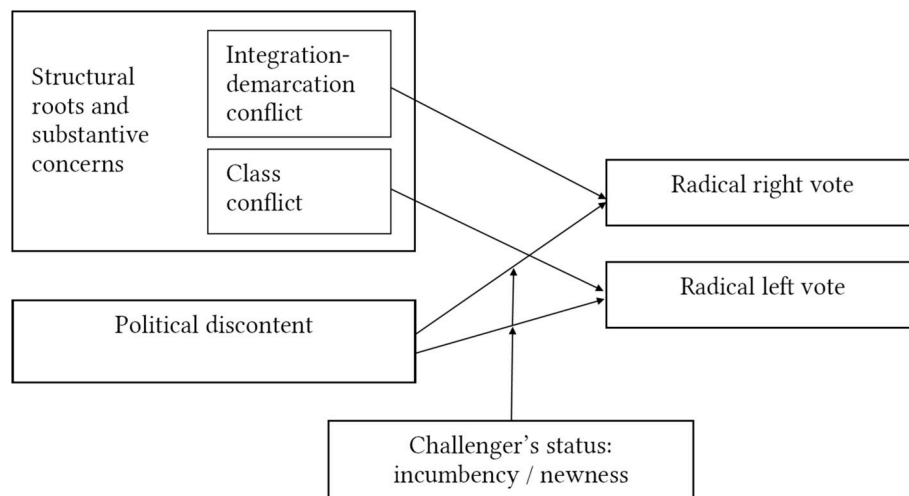


Fig. 1. The two sets of factors determining the radical right/left vote.

(Bernhard et al., 2015). Rooduijn et al., 2014 show that, after an electoral success, populist parties generally become less populist in their party programs. Haugsgjerd (2018) confirms that, in terms of political dissatisfaction, voters of the Norwegian radical right party (FrP) indeed distinguished themselves less from the voters of the mainstream parties once their party had joined the government in 2013.

Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018, 73f.) expect an interaction effect between substantive concerns and political dissatisfaction, which they link to the essence of populism, i.e. to the populist anti-elitist critique of perceived policy failure in specific domains, such as immigration (in case of right-wing populists) or wealth redistribution (in case of left-wing populists). However, they do not find the expected enhancing effect of populist attitudes (i.e. political dissatisfaction) on the impact of cultural and economic attitudes on the radical right and radical left vote. Instead, they find a substitutive effect for the populist radical left and no effect at all for the parties of the populist radical right. We propose that these inconclusive results stem from the failure to distinguish between situations where the radical parties are in government and those where they are in opposition. As long as these parties are in the opposition, we expect both substantive concerns and political dissatisfaction to add to the radical left/right vote and to possibly reciprocally enhance each other's effect on the respective vote, but once they join the government, we expect the vote for these parties to be only affected by substantive concerns, i.e. by the representation of the long-term demands for which they are typically mobilizing. Consequently, we posit:

**H2:** Political discontent enhances the respective structural foundations of the vote for radical left and radical right parties when these parties are in opposition, while it does not increase the likelihood of a vote for radical left and radical right parties when they are in government.

Second, we propose to distinguish between established challengers, and more recently mobilizing challenger parties. Radical right parties have been established for some time in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland, but they have risen only more recently in Finland (True Finns), Germany (AfD), Sweden (Sweden Democrats), and the UK (UKIP). Similarly, some radical left parties have risen only more recently. Among them we count the Left Bloc (BE) in Portugal, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece and Sinn Féin in Ireland. With respect to the distinction between established and newly rising radical parties, we can formulate two opposing expectations: on the one hand, we can expect that radical parties become more moderate as they age and become an institutionalized component of the party system. In gradually losing their status as political outsiders and radical challengers of the status quo, they are appealing also to such voters who are not generally alienated from the political system and the way how politics generally work. On the other hand, it is also plausible to expect that the political dissatisfaction of the voters of aging radical parties increases as a result of their permanent opposition status and their lack of influence. In line with the former expectation, the 'moderation' assumption, a study of Swiss parties covering the period from World War II up to the present shows that new parties generally tend to be populist when they enter the party competition, but that they tend to moderate their discourse as they age (Weber, 2018). We are not aware of any study supporting the alternative 'radicalisation' assumption.

We therefore assess whether the effect of political dissatisfaction on the vote for a radical right/left party has a stronger (H3a) or weaker (H3b) effect on the vote for recently rising radical parties than for established parties.

### 3. Data and operationalization

We use data from the cumulative file of the European Social Survey (ESS) that covers the first eight rounds (2002–2016), which allows for the operationalization of the substantive concerns of the radical left and

the radical right and of political dissatisfaction. The ESS also provides measures for the social basis of these parties (according to the Oesch (2006) class scheme), which is critical to test our hypotheses. In addition, the dataset also entails precise measures for education and household income. While it offers no measure for operationalizing subjective social status, it includes an indicator for subjective economic threat, which may serve as a proxy for status loss.

With regard to the substantive concerns of voters, the ESS allows for the operationalization of the relevant economic and cultural attitudes. For economic attitudes, the possibilities are more limited, since there is only one item on the reduction on income differences. For the cultural attitudes, by contrast, there are six items concerning immigration, which form a strong scale, and one item each for European integration and cultural liberalism. The ESS also allows for a detailed operationalization of political dissatisfaction, although it does not provide a direct measure for populism. There are the standard items about 'satisfaction with the way democracy works' (SWD) and satisfaction with the way government is doing its job, as well as the standard list of political trust items, which form a reliable scale. Together with the political trust scale, the two satisfaction items form a strong factor. We shall use the inverse of this factor as an indicator of general political dissatisfaction, which is our proxy for populist attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

We classify parties into party families according to expert surveys (Döring and Manow, 2018).<sup>2</sup> The dependent variables are two binary variables where 1 denotes that respondents voted for the radical right or for the radical left, respectively, whereas 0 denotes that respondents voted for a mainstream party (conservative, liberal, Christian-democratic and social-democratic parties). For each indicator we shall estimate a series of logit models with standard errors clustered by country. To facilitate interpretation, we present coefficient plots of average marginal effects (full results are available in the supplementary material). All the independent variables have been rescaled to the 0–1 range, so the average marginal effects correspond to the maximum effects of each independent variable on the vote choice. We include all rounds from the ESS cumulative dataset in which a country's party system featured at least one relevant radical right or radical left party. We consider a party as relevant if at least 30 respondents report to have voted for this party (see Table A1 in the supplementary material for details).

### 4. Results

In the following, we present the results. We begin by discussing the additive effects of the respective cultural and economic attitudes on the one hand and political dissatisfaction on the other hand on electoral choice for radical left and radical right parties (H1), always controlling for the structural roots of the respective vote. We then move on to study whether the effect of political dissatisfaction on the likelihood to vote for a radical challenger party differs depending on the political representation of these voters' substantive political attitudes through government participation of their parties (H2). This part of the analysis, thus, focuses on the interactions between the long-term structural and the short-term political underpinnings of radical challenger support. Finally, we analyze whether the effect of political discontent on the vote for the radical right and radical left differs for recently rising and

<sup>1</sup> The Eigenvalue of the factor is 1.7, and the factor loadings of the three items range from 0.74 to 0.77. The Appendix provides more details on data and operationalization.

<sup>2</sup> In a few cases, we have adjusted Parlgo's classification of parties: we attributed the Swiss SVP and the Finnish Finn party to the radical right family. We further include the Danish Socialist People Party as a radical left party (see e.g. Bakker et al. (2015)) and exclude M5S from the analyses as the party's profile was highly ambiguous regarding any left-right position during its early phases.



established parties (*H3*). In each step, we compare the determinants for the two types of radical parties, presenting the results in graphical form. Detailed tables with the regression results are provided in the Appendix. These tables also provide Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup>'s in order to get a rough idea of the explanatory value of the different models.

We first introduce the effect of cultural and economic attitudes, i.e. the key substantive indicators for the effect of the social change, and the effect of political dissatisfaction modeled as having cumulative effects on the electoral choice for radical challengers. Fig. 2 presents the corresponding effects on the radical right and radical left vote. Confirming previous research, we find that the radical right vote is mostly associated with cultural attitudes – above all with the voters' critical attitude towards immigration, but to a smaller extent also with their Euroscepticism. It is also striking that both cultural liberalism, operationalized by opposition to gay rights, and egalitarian economic attitudes have no effect on the radical right vote net of individual opposition to immigration and Euroscepticism. By contrast, the radical left vote is mainly driven by egalitarian economic attitudes. Euroscepticism also contributes to the radical left vote, as do culturally liberal and pro-immigration attitudes. These results largely confirm the expectations formulated by prior empirical research: the radical right vote is culturally driven and linked to the issues of the new structuring integration-demarcation conflict, while the radical left vote is both economically and culturally driven, but not systematically linked to the new structuring conflict.

Fig. 2 also presents the impact of political dissatisfaction. Importantly, in addition to the substantive concerns, political dissatisfaction contributes independently to the vote for both types of radical parties. Moreover, its effect is also substantially large for both types of parties – the most dissatisfied voters are more than 20 percent more likely to vote for either the radical right or the radical left than the most satisfied voters. Owing to changing social and economic conditions during the series of crises that have hit Europe since 2008 – the financial crisis, the Eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis, this effect may have even become more pronounced over time. When interacting a linear variable measuring the respective ESS round with the key predicting variables, we find that the effect of political dissatisfaction net of the key substantive concerns of voters becomes stronger over time among radical left voters.<sup>3</sup> Both the key substantive concern – opposition to immigration – and political dissatisfaction are largely equally important for the determination of the radical right vote throughout the period covered. By contrast, for the radical left vote, the effect of political dissatisfaction tends to become more important over time, while the key substantive concern – support for redistribution – remains stable. It appears that in the course of the economic crisis, political dissatisfaction became a somewhat more important determinant of the radical left vote than support for redistribution. The overall stable impact of the substantive concerns on the vote provides further confirmation of *H1*, i.e. for the stable structuring capacity of the underlying societal conflicts.

Second, we distinguish between radical parties in opposition and in government. During the period covered, radical right parties have been in government or have supported minority right-wing governments in no less than six countries: in Austria, they have been in government during two ESS rounds (2002, 2004), in Switzerland for the entire period, in the Netherlands in 2002 (during ESS fieldwork), as well as in Finland (2016) and Norway (2014 and 2016). Moreover, the radical right has supported a right-wing government in the Netherlands (2010), and in Denmark (2002–2010). Radical left parties have been in government or supported centre-left minority governments in six countries during the period covered: they were part of the government in Cyprus and Norway from 2006–2012, in Finland (2002), in Denmark (2012), and they supported a centre-left government in Portugal (2014 (during

fieldwork), 2016), in Denmark (2014) and Sweden (2002–2006 and 2014–2018). As is shown in Fig. 3, which presents the direct effects of the most important economic/cultural attitudes and of political dissatisfaction, incumbency does make a difference for political dissatisfaction for both types of parties.<sup>4</sup> Political dissatisfaction contributes significantly less to the radical right vote, if the corresponding party is in government, although it still is positively associated with the radical right vote. The radical left vote, by contrast, becomes even negatively associated with political dissatisfaction when the corresponding party is part of the government. The latter effect is mainly the result of Cyprus (see Figure A5 in the online appendix), where the radical left is very strong and has been the dominant governing party for most of the period covered. While the effect of political dissatisfaction on the radical vote is attenuated or even reversed, the effect of the key substantive concerns remains unchanged (in the case of the radical left) or is somewhat enhanced (in the case of the radical right) for governing radical parties. Figure A4 in the online appendix adds some more details for the six countries where the radical right has been in government or has supported right-wing minority governments, showing that political dissatisfaction is in each case significantly less associated with the radical right vote when the radical right party is in government or supporting a minority government.<sup>5</sup>

Turning to the interactions between substantive concerns and political dissatisfaction, the results are presented in Fig. 4.<sup>6</sup> The results clearly show that there is no interaction between substantive concerns and political dissatisfaction in determining the radical right or radical left vote. If the two types of parties are in the opposition, the two factors both contribute in a more or less additive way to the radical vote, providing empirical support for *H2*. If anything, the effect of the substantive concern is somewhat attenuated among the politically satisfied at lower levels of the substantive concern. By contrast, if the two types of party are in government, political dissatisfaction does not contribute anything to the vote for either type of radical party.

Next, we examine the constituencies of established and recently arising radical parties from right and left. For this comparison, we only consider the ESS rounds from 2010 onwards, since there are not enough respondents in the dataset before for these newly rising parties. We maintain the distinction between the parties in government and in opposition, since it has such an important moderating influence on the effects of political dissatisfaction. The results are presented in Fig. 5, which corresponds to Fig. 3, except that it now also distinguishes between established and more recent radical parties.<sup>7</sup> As the figure shows, when radical parties are in opposition, political dissatisfaction is equally important for the voters of established and new parties. This positive effect of political dissatisfaction applies both to radical right and radical left parties who find themselves in opposition. Thus, the voters of these parties do not mellow, but continue to be highly dissatisfied independently of whether their party is established or not – a result that neither supports the radicalisation (*H3a*) nor the moderation hypothesis (*H3b*) concerning the effect of political dissatisfaction.

By contrast, when radical parties are in government, the effect of political dissatisfaction on the vote for radical right parties is stronger

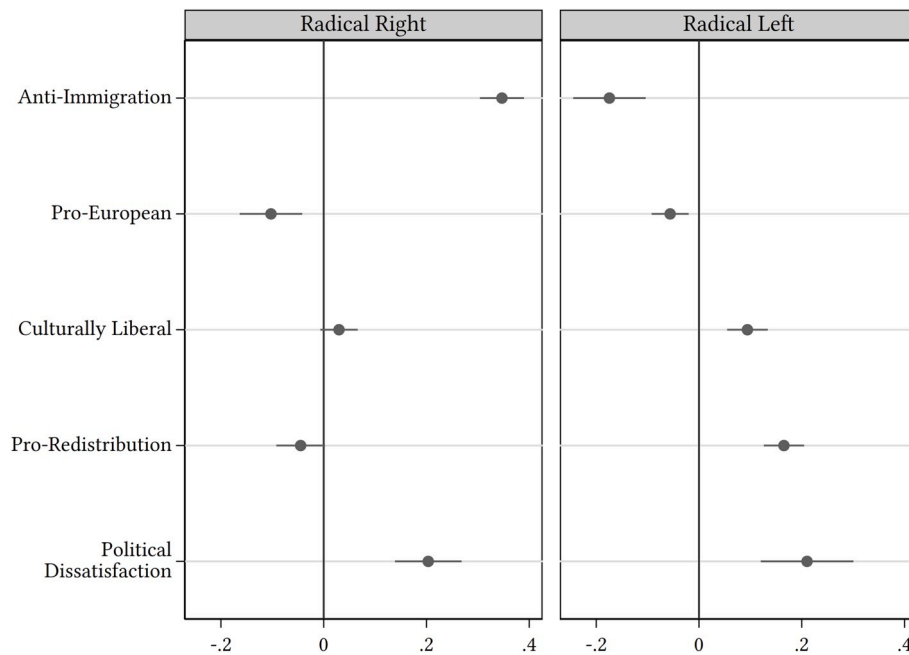
<sup>4</sup> The detailed regression results are presented in Table A4 in the online appendix.

<sup>5</sup> For the special case of Switzerland, where the radical right party (SVP) has always been in government during the period covered, but its leader was expelled from government and replaced by another party representative, please refer to the discussion of Figure A4 in the Appendix.

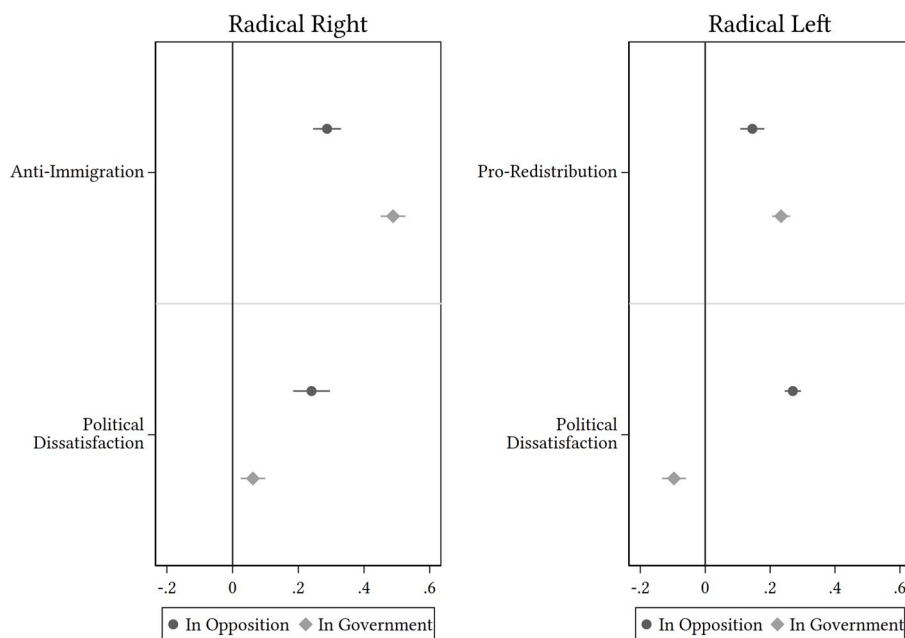
<sup>6</sup> The detailed regression results are presented in Table A5 in the online appendix.

<sup>7</sup> The detailed regression results are presented in Table A6 in the online appendix.

<sup>3</sup> The detailed regression results are presented in Table A3 and graphically visualised in Figure A3 in the supplementary material.



**Fig. 2.** The impact of substantive demands and political dissatisfaction on the vote for challenger parties (controlling for subjective social status and social-structural characteristics): average marginal effects.



**Fig. 3.** Radical parties in opposition vs. in government: the impact of key substantive demands and political dissatisfaction on the vote (controlling for social-structural characteristics): average marginal effects.

for recently rising than for established ones, partially supporting hypothesis H3a.<sup>8</sup> These parties still benefit from the political dissatisfaction of their voters even if they are part of the government.

<sup>8</sup> Switzerland has been excluded from this analysis for reasons that are explained in the Appendix (see also fn 5): although the SVP is an established radical right party that has always been in government during the period covered, once its leader had been expelled from the government by its coalition partners in 2007, the party started to behave like a newly rising radical right party again.

We further explore the variation of the effect of political dissatisfaction on the vote for old or new radical left parties by focussing on three countries, in which these two types of radical left parties coexist in the party system: Spain, Portugal and Greece.<sup>9</sup>

Both the established communist left and the new radical left challengers benefit from political dissatisfaction. In all three countries, high

<sup>9</sup> The respective established communist parties are namely IU, PCP and KKE, and the more recent radical left parties Podemos, BE, and Syriza.

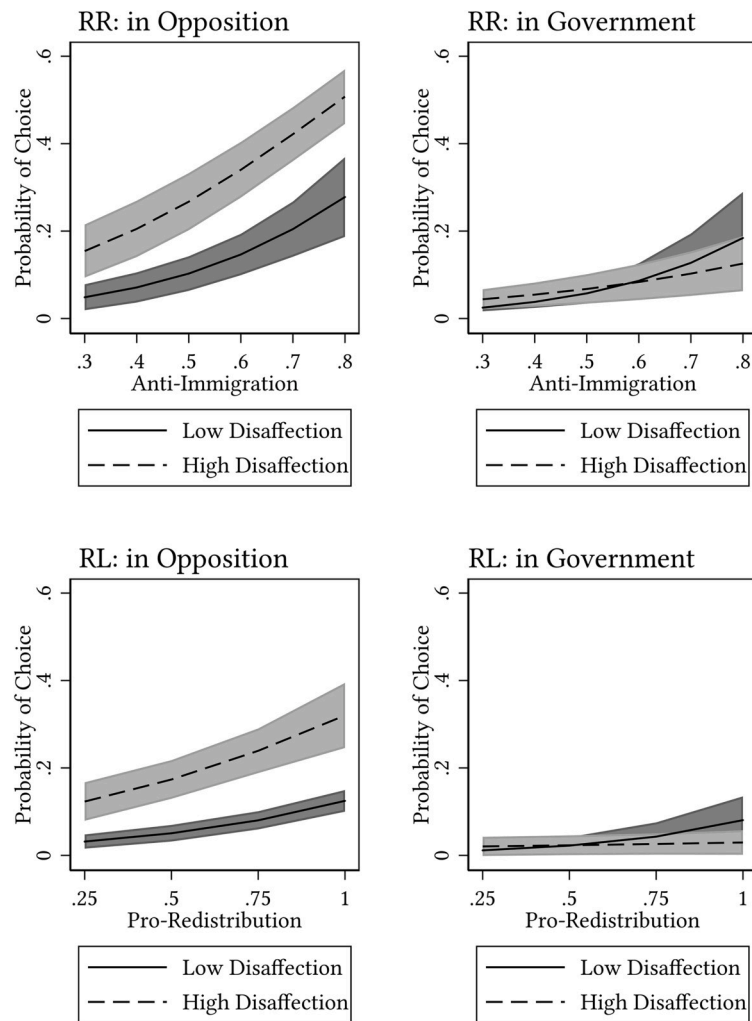


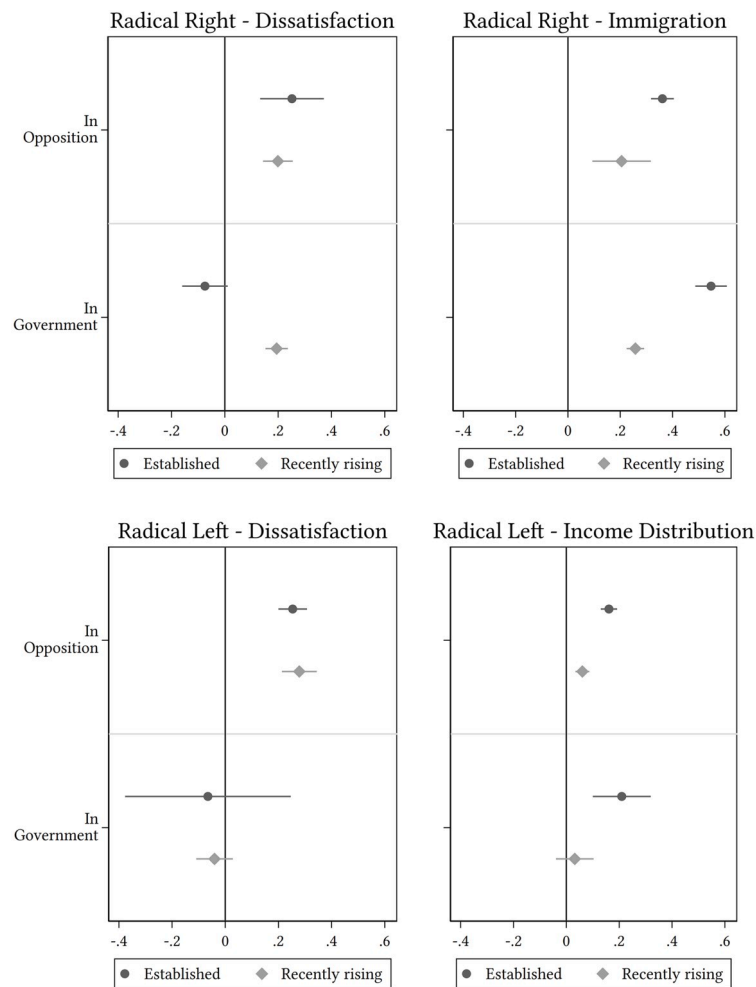
Fig. 4. Interaction effects between key substantive demands and political dissatisfaction, by incumbency: probability of vote choice.

levels of voters' political discontent serve to increase the electoral prospects of both types of parties (see Figure A5 in the supplementary material). Thus, with the exception of governing radical right parties, political dissatisfaction appears to play a critical role in fuelling the electoral success of radical parties, irrespective of whether these actors belong to the established group of parties. This result appears critical in view of understanding the electoral appeal of radical parties in suggesting that it is not merely their status as political outsiders that pushes politically disaffected voters towards these parties. Confirming the findings previously reported, a vote for radical parties is above all motivated by a set of underlying substantive grievances of voters that act as principal driver of support for radical challengers in government and is further accentuated by feelings of political discontent in such political contexts in which the respective radical party is not in power.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Are we to grasp the electoral success of radical parties across Europe by taking seriously the substance of their policy profile or by being conscious of their politically motivated, populist electoral appeal? This article contributes to our understanding of the rise of radical challenger parties across western Europe by systematically combining an analysis of the structural determinants related to social change with the study of the more political determinants derived from opportunity structures for radical parties in government and opposition. The results show that while the vote for the two types of parties is rooted in different sets of structural factors, it is conditioned in largely comparable ways by political dynamics.

In showing that the substantive demands of voters have a large,



**Fig. 5.** Established and new radical parties in opposition vs. in government, 2010–2016: the impact of key substantive demands and political dissatisfaction on the vote (controlling for social-structural characteristics): average marginal effects.

independent and stable role in determining the vote for radical challengers, the results indicate that the factors related to long-term social change contribute to the success of these parties in addition to political discontent originating in the specific political dynamics. The effect of the structural concerns on the vote for these parties from left and right has not changed over time, which confirms the durable structuring impact of the underlying social conflicts. Support for these parties is driven by stable, structural conflicts of society, suggesting that as long as these conflicts exist, the electoral fortune of these parties will be a function of the substantive concerns linked to these conflicts. On the other hand, this also means that the impact of political dissatisfaction is independent of these long-term structural factors, suggesting that changing political dynamics may work to decrease the overall appeal of radical challengers. Given the independence of the impact of political dissatisfaction, it is important to highlight that its role varies depending on the political conditions under which the challenger parties operate: the effect of general political dissatisfaction on the radical vote is greatly reduced for both radical left and radical right parties who join the

government. It appears that only newly rising, but not established right-wing parties continue to benefit from voters' dissatisfaction, if they participate in a government, suggesting that they succeed in presenting themselves as an outsider challenger when in office. It is important to add that this conclusion is based on the western European experience, where the radical challengers so far did not get government power undivided, but always had to compose with coalition partners – a consequence mainly of the proportional electoral systems that prevail in most of western Europe. The case of the Swiss People's Party suggests that there are situations, where populist parties, even if in government, rely on and continue to be stoking specific political discontent. In the Swiss situation, where a party can be part of the government and at the same time attack the government with direct-democratic instruments, the mobilization of specific political discontent remains an important instrument of a radical right party like the Swiss People's Party. In this particular case of a radical right party in government, the substantive concerns are enhanced by specific political discontent in the determination of the radical right vote. This is an example of what [Albertazzi](#)



and McDonnell (2005) have called a 'one foot in, one foot out-strategy'. Such a split strategy might be particularly effective in the case a radical party joins a minority government.

In emphasising that their political discontent equally motivates radical right and radical left voters in addition to the fundamentally different substantive grievances that each of the respective electoral constituency harbours, the results of this study call for further investigating the specific political dynamics moderating this effect. A number of western European countries included in this study are de-centrally organised, offering ample variation in sub-national government participation of radical parties from the left and the right that can be linked to sub-nationally representative individual-level data. Additionally, panel data should not only inform future research about the causal relationship of political dissatisfaction and radical left and radical right electoral choice but also about the complex temporal order of (dis-)satisfaction and voting. The present study contributes to the understanding of the long-term electoral prospects of radical challengers from the left and the right by drawing attention to the political dynamics which act to moderate the impact of the political discontent of their voters.

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## Author statement

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102138>.

Research data for this article: The data, code and any additional materials required to reproduce all analyses in this article are available at the Harvard Dataverse: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/OOMBEL>.

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