5. Who votes for the Extreme/Radical Right parties in Western Europe?

Understanding the phenomena of the extreme right can be difficult, and despite extensive academic discussion of the parties' place on the political spectrum, conclusions on its ideology and of connected voting behaviour remain incomplete.

This essay will discuss the current state of the extreme right polity, examining the socio-demographic and attitudinal factors that seem to suggest a propensity to vote for extreme right parties in elections in Western Europe.  This will include academic research into the explanations of who votes for the parties as well as analysis as to why this is the case.  It will also look at the effects of differing political institutions between countries and how that impacts on the extreme right vote.

While the extreme right party family is often considered to be a diverse group of parties holding varying policy sets and methods of putting them into practice, there are connections between them that make studying their ideologies, and voting behaviour in general, pertinent.

The extreme right parties share a target voting demographic through which they believe they can tailor policies to maximise their potential at elections.  In that sense, it is difficult to discern their political motivations as being any different whatsoever from mainstream political parties that also target specific sections of the electorate with their values and policies.

We can ascertain that the extreme right "electorate" can be identified as being disproportioned in some ways and these differences are generally seen as a basis of explanation.  Although these features are often very striking when discussing the extreme right, on closer inspection these variables are not always as strong in their support of socio-demographic theories of voting as they appear to be.

The most obvious factor is that the extreme right voters tend to be disproportionately male.  This is a widely recognised feature of the extreme right, and one that is often taken for granted when considering the party grouping.  Research into extreme right voting has found that "there is a persistent gender gap when controlling for social, economic, and political variables" (Givens, 2004, p. 48) and one that exists across many countries, although varying slightly in strength.

However, despite common explanations and hypotheses towards why this is the case, traditional ideas that the variation can be explained by gender differences in "attitudes toward immigration and occupational structure" (ibid, p.50) were not supported by research.  The only observable characteristic found was that "blue-collar workers were more likely to be anti-immigrant than those in other sectors", something which is not limited to gender roles.

A key explanation as to why the gender gap might exist came from Harteveld et al. who believed men were more likely to "attach high salience" to the issues that the extreme right prioritise compared with women.  This idea is expanded by the explanation that:

> "Even if men and women are to the same extent 'tough' on issues such as immigration and law and order, such attitudes are more likely to be translated into a willingness to support the PRR [extreme right] among those voters for whom these topics are most important; and these are most often men". (Harteveld, et al., 2015, p. 129)

Therefore, with this crucial explanation, we can show that there is an indeed a gender effect upon extreme right voting but that it is not necessarily because of a difference in values.

Those voting for extreme right parties also often seen to be younger.  This phenomenon may not be an altogether explanatory feature, however, as the theory as to why there is an age imbalance in extreme right support is based around the idea that younger people feel "marginalized" (Betz in Jackman & Volpert, 1996, p.504), something which is also true of older people.   It can be said that both younger and older people, for different reasons, "lack social ties" and have "weaker social integration" which leads to them voting for extreme right parties. (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006, p. 421).  It can also be observed that both "young and old voters depend disproportionately on welfare", which means that they will be far more receptive to the both elements of the extreme right's welfare chauvinist principles: that welfare is a good thing for people of the country and that immigrations are "competitors" for this service. (ibid.)

While younger voters may be more likely to vote extreme right, these parties often look to 'broaden' their appeal towards older voters who they feel might be more receptive to their message of restoring cultural values and who, of course, tend to vote in higher numbers at elections.

Voters for extreme right parties tend to be less well-educated, in that they are less likely to hold a university degree on the whole.  This is believed to be the case as "voters with high levels of educational attainment are more likely to embrace liberal values" (Weakliem in Arzheimer, 2009, p.263).  These liberal values are very much at odds with many core beliefs of those on the extreme right, with xenophobia being very rare amongst liberals.  It can also be surmised that the extreme right's rhetoric against the "elites" is more resonant with those that are less well-educated, who are less likely to consider themselves to be a part of an elite, which by definition often includes a measure of education.

There is also an impact of economic deprivation on the extreme right vote, with most voters not being rich and tending to be in some form of insecure employment.  The development of society in the most recent decades has created "accelerated modernization" but which has come with "social costs". (Betz, 1993, p. 420)  This means that the "shift from modern mass production and mass consumption to what has been defined as a new regime of flexible accumulation" and "a renewed acceleration of the shift from the secondary to the tertiary sector" has changed society in a fundamental way. (ibid.)  With such rapid change in society, it has meant that a large population within that has become an "increasingly marginalized sector of unskilled and semiskilled workers, young people without complete formal education and training, and the growing mass of the long-term unemployed" and who have become the so-called "losers of the accelerated modernization process". (ibid.)

This societal change is played upon by extreme right parties who seek to hark back to a 'golden age' of sorts where the nation was stronger and inherently 'better', typically citing one "that began around 1950, but that ended abruptly after the oil shock of the early 1970s" (Jackman & Volpert, 1996, p. 501) which is a sentiment that is naturally shared by those who are unemployed and feel excluded from wider society.

However, while this phenomenon can be determined to exist in general of individuals, it can be less clear when taking a wider view of society. The link between deprivation and or unemployment and propensity to vote for extreme right parties can be seen as an ecological fallacy as "while unemployment may influence right-wing extremism at the individual or group-level, it nonetheless fails to exert a similar effect at the macro-level". (Knigge, 1998, p. 268) This means it can be hard to analyse and contextualise changes in support for extreme right parties as being related to macro-economic changes, such as the late 2000s financial crisis. Knigge's theory would preclude that the advances for parties such as the Danish People's Party, Sweden Democrats and Front National since then are not a result of economic factors.

Finally, extreme right voters have a higher propensity to be atheist or not claim religious affiliation compared with the rest of the electorate. Studies into this effect seem to suggest that the reason for this is again that this section of the electorate is less integrated with society and less likely to follow "norms" of procedure that go along with belonging to certain groups. Research showed that rather than a positive relationship, it is more of a negative one – with belonging to a religion providing a "vaccine effect" against the radical right and that:

> "religiosity has a substantial and statistically positive effect on the likelihood of a voter identifying with a Christian Democratic or conservative party. This in turn massively reduces the likelihood of casting a vote for a party of the radical right in many countries." (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009)

It is perhaps not surprising that a set of parties that have socio-cultural policies at their heart are so determined in their pursuit of a socio-cultural voting bloc to support them. However, it is difficult to conclusively decide upon certain socio-demographic categories that will strongly vote for extreme right parties, even in specific circumstances.

Related to the socio-demographic features of society that make up the portion that vote for extreme right parties are also the attitudinal factors, which can be considered to be the beliefs of the public which concur the message of extreme right parties, or the demand-side factors as described by Betz (1993).

One of the extreme right's core principles is the belief in policies intended to appeal to the masses and further distance themselves from the "elites" they oppose so vociferously.  As explained by Betz:

> "They are populist in their instrumentalization of sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment and their appeal to the common man and his allegedly superior common sense." (1993, p. 413)

With this appeal to the "common man", extreme right parties are specifically targeting the group of society that are in the majority or that are seen to be most sympathetic to their cause.

This also plays into the key conception of immigration scepticism, as extreme right parties believe that they can play on the fears of the sectors of society that are in the majority that they are "under threat" from the incoming minorities.

As these arguments form such a large part of many extreme right parties' platform, it is unsurprising that it is one of the key reasons why voters choose to support them. The issue of immigration is presented in a way with "frames that link immigration to criminality and to social tension, and also with frames that link immigration to the loss of cultural distinction and national identity." (Rydgren, 2008, pp. 760-61)  This essentially blames immigration for societal change from which many of the extreme right's core vote are the "losers" of. (cf. Betz, 1994)

This strong negative association with immigration can often result in xenophobic or even racist attitudes coming to the fore.  The British National Party in the UK is often cited as an example of a racist political party.  Their core message, and key to success, was summarised as being "racism plus X" by a senior Labour party official (Wainwright, 2003), whereby the racist elements of the party can succeed if brought together with a "local grievance" issue.

While some parties go as far as being classed as xenophobic, this attitude is not often replicated by the populace at large in most countries, and xenophobia isn't as big a factor as immigration scepticism in explaining the reasons why people vote for the extreme right parties.  As Rydgren found, "contrary to expectations, xenophobic attitudes… were a far less significant factor than immigration scepticism for predicting who will vote for the radical right." (2008, p. 760)

Also, it has been determined that "there is no mechanistic relationship between the number of immigrants in a given area and the number of votes for the extreme right". (Hainsworth, 2008, p. 76) In fact, the converse has been found to be true with "proximity to and experience of migrant workers…. [promoting] a healthy familiarity, good working relations and mutually enriching living experiences".  (ibid., parenthesis my own)

Therefore, it is more the perception of immigration as espoused by extreme right parties rather than actual experiences of immigration that have proved to be key in providing them with an electoral support base.

Despite immigration scepticism being a key attitudinal component of those voting for the extreme right, it's important to note that it is "not the *only* issue, or rather it is not the only issue for all extreme right voters" (Mudde, 1999, p. 186)  These other important issues that are common among extreme right parties' electorates include: "security/crime, social welfare, and anti-party/politics sentiment". (ibid.)  Sometimes these issues can overtake immigration in terms of being "the single most important issue" (ibid. p. 191) for particular political parties such as the nationalistic sentiments of the German DVU and the support for Flemish independence amongst the Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang. (ibid.)

Therefore it is also worth considering the effect that these individual factors have upon extreme right support, although doing so in the knowledge that immigration still often trumps these concerns in general.

One nuance to extreme right parties that often make them more difficult to classify is that in the recent decades they have become much more open to social welfare than their classification on the right wing of the political spectrum would suggest.  This theory of "welfare chauvinism" is a belief that welfare is a good idea, but only when limited to the people of that country, therefore excluding immigrants.

This somewhat contradicts Kitschelt's "winning formula" thesis that extreme right parties need to adopt a neoliberal economic outlook to have electoral success with their social policies in tow.  (Kitschelt in Mudde, 1999, p. 189)  He argues that persuing a welfare chauvinist agenda is a wasted endeavour as the "potential target groups" are "quite limited" but as noted earlier, both the young and the old sections

of society are reliant upon welfare and are courted by extreme right parties.  It has also been observed that parties that put welfare at the heart of their platform such as the Front National, Vlaams Belang/Blok and Austrian FPÖ "are among the electorally most successful within the extreme right party family".  (Mudde, 1999, p.189)

Another attitudinal element that lends its support to extreme right parties is that of political trust.  Corruption naturally decreases trust in the political system, and as it is the mainstream establishment that are generally involved in such scandals, the extreme right parties are able to capitalise on the anti-elite feeling that it generates and to improve their electoral performance.

Recent studies in Western Europe have shown "that low levels of trust in public officials and political institutions are associated with a higher propensity to vote for a radical right party" (Ziller & Schübel, 2015, p. 382) but, as with voting systems, this effect varies between countries as the "relationship between corruption and trust in public officials is moderated by institutional quality." (ibid.)

Another key finding of this research though was that "while political trust (and indirectly political corruption) has a significant impact on radical right support, it rarely outperforms perceived immigrant threat as a predictor." (ibid., p. 383)  Therefore once again, other attitudinal factors have taken a smaller role in the explanation of extreme right voting compared with immigration.

Crime and reactions to it are another area in which the extreme right gains a lot of support for its policies from public attitudes, but again it can be one to be seen as borne out of immigration scepticism.

Law and order policies have become focal points for extreme right campaigns, pledging "punitive sentencing, strengthening of police forces…and the return of the death penalty" with the latter policy being a standing policy of both the BNP and Front National.  (Hainsworth, 2008, p. 77)

However, these are often positioned as a "consequence of immigration" (ibid.) with "the issue of immigration and a common perception of linking foreigners with rising crime levels... [ensuring] it became a focal point of right-wing extremist activity and propaganda" (McGowan in Hainsworth, 2008, p. 76, parenthesis my own).  This means that for the extreme right crime is merely a symptom of a different problem,

one that should be treated ultimately by curbing immigration.  It is no co-incidence that such strong law and order policies co-exist with strong anti-immigration policies, such as the BNP's policy of repatriating foreigners.  (British National Party, 2010)

While extreme right parties belong to a distinct and separate family, it has often been described as a political unit that, because of the "supply-side" problem of them being "single-issue" parties that they do not have a distinct ideology.  However, Mudde refutes this argument by examining that "ideological core" of these extreme right "party ideologies" and he defines the "nucleus" of this as being "nationalism".  (1999, 189)  This strong ideologgical influence can permeate through other policies of the extreme right ideology – including areas such as the authoritarian doctrine that many hold and even into the immigration scepticism, which again raises the question as to whether that is the driving factor behind the parties' ideologies ahead of everything else.

These nationalistic tendencies of extreme right parties have helped them, along with institutional factors, to be more successful in European Parliament elections than in national elections.  With the "new opportunity structures" that a directly elected European chamber offered, the European Parliament elections have always been a conduit for "nationalist protest of the radical right". (Minkenburg & Perrineau, 2007, p. 34)

In essence, the relative modern success of extreme right parties can be said to have happened as an interaction between the socio-demographic and attitudinal factors. It can be shown that "populist radical right parties thrive electorally when a high demand for minority issues is matched by a corresponding supply". (Pirro, 2015, p. 199)

But while there can be a cohesion between the approach of the extreme right across Europe, it is also fair to say that a signature of the party family is that their policies and those who vote for them can be relatively flexible depending on the situation in individual countries.  Taggart identifies a key feature of populist and extreme right thinking as being "highly chameleonic" saying that:

> "This is not to say that the contextual attributes hide the 'real' nature of populism, but is simply to observe that populism is de facto substantially contextually-contingent". (Taggart, 2003, p. 8)

More recent findings also suggest that the combinations of both socio-demographic and attitudinal factors are also highly dependent on the country involved.  Spierings & Zaslove found that "in Belgium, France, Norway and Switzerland...attitudes towards economic redistribution do affect the PRR voting behaviour of men more strongly than women" but also that "those who hold authoritarian or nativist views in combination with a strong belief that gays and lesbians should be able to live their lives as they choose have a disproportionately high likelihood of voting for PRR parties in Sweden and Norway" (2015, p. 158)  These show that regardless of the factor set used to analyse extreme right parties, whether socio-demographic or attitudinal, there is a large scope for variation and that determining a uniform voting bloc for these parties is very problematic.

To add a third element to the consideration of why people vote for extreme right parties, it is worth considering the "external supply-side factors" as defined by Mudde. (2007, Ch. 10)  These include political institutions, the media and culture. These elements can help to shape the attitudinal factors of the population and create the environment through which extreme right parties can succeed in elections.

A theory through which many view the phenomena of growing extreme right vote is that it is a protest vote where the electorate are attempting to express their dissatisfaction with the political establishment.  The anti-elite sentiment is a strong feature of extreme right parties' message as they seek to distance themselves from the mainstream.  This is what makes the extreme right quite so "extreme".

The protest vote phenomenon can be considered in context of voting systems, supposing that "in highly disproportional systems, voting for minor parties becomes a rather futile act". (Jackman & Volpert, 1996, p. 506)  Such a theory would help explain why extreme right parties have in such situations are less successful, such as the British National Party never having had parliamentary representation in the United Kingdom and the Front National's presence in the French Parliament being much more limited than their popular support would suggest was possible.  It is also the case of why extreme right parties receive more representation in proportional European Parliament elections compared with national elections, with these elections being classed as "second-order elections" that are:

> "characterized by low turnout, sanction voting vis-à-vis the parties in power [the establishment], and a fragmentation of the political spectrum, which means that there is an advantage for extremist parties." (Minkenburg & Perrineau, 2007, p. 34, parenthesis my own)

Historical examples of this include the Front National's breakthrough in the 1980s and Vlaams Blok's success in the mid-1990s (ibid.) and it is also proven in a modern context by the BNP winning two seats in the 2009 European Parliament elections and the Front National's overall win in the 2014 European elections where they earned 24 seats.

However "were there a perfect relationship between electoral disproportionality and multi-partism, we would not also have to consider the effects of the latter on support for the extreme right". (ibid.)  This suggests that while the electoral system and its' disproportionality do have an effect on the way in which extreme right parties are represented, it is not sufficient in explaining the reason why people vote for them. This can be demonstrated by the fact that Front National leader Marine Le Pen received 17.9% of the vote in the first round of the 2012 French Presidential Election, even though the election could be viewed as a choice between the PS/PRG candidate, and eventual winner, Francois Hollande, and incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy of the UMP.

There is definitely an element of anti-establishment protesting in the support of the extreme right parties, and it is somewhat affected by the utility of voting for such parties in a given electoral system, but the fact remains that the attitudinal and socio-demographic factors play a stronger role.

Therefore factors such as electoral systems and the "institutional quality" of a nation's political system do affect the way in which extreme right parties achieve their success, but do not provide a wholly significant explanation as to why segments of the population will vote for extreme right parties.

While many attempts have been made to define a voting bloc for extreme right parties, because of such a wide variation in the parties across Western Europe it is difficult to definitively discern the factors that vote for these parties.

The combination of social-demographic and attitudinal factors is critical, and different combinations of features in different countries provide very separate results.  These

country-specific results are also influenced by institutional factors such as the voting system, which conspire to alter the utility that a vote for an extreme right party has. What can be determined though is a propensity for the extreme right voters to be younger, male, less-educated, less economically secure and, above all else, critical of immigration.  This final factor is the one true determinant of extreme right voting.

Word Count – 3,807 (excl. bibliography)

**Bibliography**

Arzheimer, K., 2009. "Contextual Factors and the Extreme Right Vote in Western Europe", 1980-2002. *American Journal of Political Science,* 53(2), pp. 259-275.

Arzheimer, K. & Carter, E., 2006. "Political opportunity structures and right-wing extremist party success". *European Journal of Political Research,* 45(3), pp. 419-443.

Arzheimer, K. & Carter, E., 2009. *Religiosity and Voting for the Radical Right,* Keele: Keele European Parties Research Unit.

Betz, H. G., 1993. "The New Politics of Resentment: Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe". *Comparative Politics,* 25(4), pp. 413-427.

British National Party, 2010. *Democracy, Freedom, Culture and Identity: British National Party General Elections Manifesto 2010.* s.l.:s.n.

Givens, T. E., 2004. "The Radical Right Gender Gap". *Comparative Political Studies,* 37(1), pp. 30-54.

Hainsworth, P., 2008. *The Extreme Right in Western Europe.* 1st ed. Oxford: Routledge.

Harteveld, E., Van der Brug, W., Dahlberg, S. & Kokkonen, A., 2015. "The gender gap in populist radical right voting: examining the demand side in Western and Eastern Europe". *Patterns of Prejudice,* 49(1-2), pp. 103-124.

Jackman, R. W. & Volpert, K., 1996. "Conditions Favouring Parties of the Extreme Right in Western Europe". *British Journal of Political Science,* 26(4), pp. 501-521.

Knigge, P., 1998. "The ecological correlates of right-wing extremism in Western Europe". *European Journal of Political Research,* Volume 34, pp. 249-279.

Minkenburg, M. & Perrineau, P., 2007. "The Radical Right in the European Elections 2004". *International Political Science Review,* 28(1), pp. 29-55.

Mudde, C., 1999. "The Single-Issue Party Thesis: Extreme Right Parties and the Immigration Issue". *West European Politics,* 22(3), pp. 183-197.

Mudde, C., 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pirro, A. L. P., 2015. *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, impact, and electoral performance.* s.l.:Routledge.

Rydgren, J., 2008. "Immigration sceptics, xenophobes or racists? Radical right-wing voting in six West European countries". *European Journal of Political Research,* 47(6), pp. 737-765.

Spierings, N. & Zaslove, A., 2015. "Gendering the vote for populist radical-right". *Patterns of Prejudice,* 49(1-2), pp. 135-162.

Taggart, P., 2003. *The Populist Turn in the Politics of the New Europe.* Brighton, University of Sussex.

Wainwright, M., 2003. "Eternal vigilance". *The Guardian*, 17 October.

Ziller, C. & Schübel, T., 2015. ""The Pure People" versus "the Corrupt Elite"?: Political Corruption, Political Trust and the Success of Radical Right Parties in Europe." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties,* 25(3), pp. 368-386.