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SYMPOSIUM

Introduction: comparing and reconceptualising the (populist) radical right

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Abstract This symposium probes contemporary classifications of the "far-right", "populist radical right" and "radical right" variety. It also considers whether there is a need to look beyond socio-economic factors to explain the upward trajectory such parties experienced in recent years. The symposium thus connects to ongoing debates regarding the nature of this party family (or families) and to previous accounts of their successes across Western Europe.

Keywords Euroscepticism · Extreme right · Extreme right-wing populist · Immigration · Nationalism · Populist radical right · Radical right

The days when one could identify certain non-mainstream parties by their mix of biological racism and ethnic understandings of belonging now seem a thing of the past. Ongoing attempts to *mainstream* their electoral appeal (Minkenberg 2013; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009) have not only impacted on coalition dynamics, on the "health" of democracy and on party—electorate linkages (see, e.g. De Lange 2012; Canovan 1999; Mair 1989). They also have implications for how we conceptualise and understand parties typically classified as extreme, radical or one-issue (see, e.g. Ennser 2012; Ignazi 2003). If viewed comparatively, then a particular set of challenges tend to emerge. Conventional classifications often consider the

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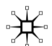
anti-immigration stance to be an important—if not crucial—feature of these parties (see, e.g. Wagner 2011; Adams et al. 2006). Yet authoritarianism, nationalism, populism and welfare state/labour market chauvinism are increasingly invoked when characterising this disparate party family (see, e.g. Wagner and Meyer 2017; Rydgren 2007; Mudde 2004; Golder 2003). These intra-family differences thus raise several important questions. First, what do the various tags scholars used mean today? Mudde (2004), for example, refers to the "populist radical right" (PRR), whereas Rydgren (2005) labels similar parties "extreme right-wing populist". Lucassen and Lubbers (2012), Meguid (2005), and Norris (2005), on the other hand, call them "far-right", "niche" and "radical right" parties. However, several challengers currently demanding a more involved role for the state often started out wanting the exact opposite. The status quo was criticised for having an excessive control over the economy and for its high levels of taxation (Taggart 2002). Any significant opposition to immigration—or any equally strong nationalist sentiments—tended to play minor roles on their electoral agendas and for their party identities. Yet some of these fringe parties also championed free-market ideals, often coupled with draconian approaches to border control and to integration. The Norwegian Progress Party, for example, fits very well in with the former category, whereas the UK Independence Party corresponds better to the latter. The immigration "issue" thus constitutes a core part of the identity for *some* of these parties, whereas for others, it became important at a much later stage. Yet this diverse set of parties is typically grouped together under the same umbrella, albeit with different labels (see, e.g. Camia and Caramani 2012; Ennser 2012; Zaslove 2009). This spread suggests that the extreme; niche; PRR; and radical right tags could be challenging to use as analytical tools. Their broad-church definitions are partly responsible for the element of concept stretching that occurred over time. The labels are often attached to parties where the neo-Nazi ideology has (partially) been rooted out, yet are simultaneously applied to parties where such a belief system is very much alive. And the terms frequently incorporate parties with quite different views on state–market relations (see, e.g. contributions in Akkerman et al. 2016).

It is worth reflecting on how past—and recent—political developments affect the qualifiers that determine membership to this (loosely grouped) "family". Is it perhaps time to move beyond traditional definitions emphasising nativism, xenophobia and a reduction in numbers-type rhetoric when categorising parties as either "populist", "radical" and/or "rightist"? This is a particularly relevant question to ask given the increasingly blurred boundaries between "mainstream" and "non-mainstream" parties. A quick glance across (Western) Europe returns several cases where a traditionally defined mainstream has sought to tighten border controls and to move away from multicultural-type policies. This so-called return of assimilation (see contributions to Joppke and Morawska 2003) arguably raises questions about conceptualisation and definition. But it also challenges conventional cut-off points for when parties can (and should) be labelled as "mainstream" rather than "extreme", "PRR" or "radical". For example, are their views on taxation, labour market arrangements and welfare state policies any different from those expressed by the political mainstream? And should these views diverge, then have they remained static or have they evolved in any particular direction over time? Moreover, does it make sense to label

parties as being "radical" or on the "right" when their positions on, say, welfare state management do not fundamentally differ from those of social democratic-type parties? Indeed, these are questions Valdez and Eger address in their contribution to this symposium. By invoking the Manifesto Project Dataset, they consider positional changes niche parties made since 1970. The authors pay special attention to economic *and* sociocultural questions, thus bringing the multidimensionality of these parties to the fore. Valdez and Eger's key finding—party ideology is not consistent in comparative perspective—suggests a degree of variation *between* those parties typically placed in the PRR, radical or extreme right categories. In fact, so much diversity is identified that Valdez and Eger question the accuracy of locating these parties on the economic *and* sociocultural right. What could be more helpful, they suggest, is to describe contemporary radical right parties as *neo-nationalis*t. That is, the unifying factor is not necessarily a shared platform on economic issues—or even on state–individual relationships. The commonality is rather that they subscribe to a subset of nationalist thinking, namely the neo-nationalist one. Maintaining—rather than to make—boundaries is therefore a particularly relevant feature of these parties. Szöcsik and Polyakova pursue a similar logic. Nativism and defending national sovereignty are still important, but what appears to be gaining traction is how latent—sometimes explicit—Eurosceptic positions can be exploited. Should the niche contender manage to capitalise on voters' anti-EU sentiments, then it may well yield greater electoral feats than what currently is the case. And particularly so, the authors argue, when Euroscepticism is a key feature of their electoral mobilisation strategies. Szöcsik and Polyakova thus shift analytical attention elsewhere when they suggest that the main "threat" is not necessarily the migrant "other" but rather the supranational one. However, if mainstream parties manage to pacify growing levels of Euroscepticism, then it may inadvertently lead to (even) greater results for the radical contender since the latter often has a comparatively stronger reputation on the EU "issue".

A second question we pose relates to the electoral successes of non-mainstream challengers. Conventional wisdom suggests a fairly strong link between levels of unemployment and niche contenders increasing their share of the vote. But such a conclusion may mask other, equally important, factors. For example, it risks overlooking the role played by prevailing institutions, particularly those governing labour markets and unemployment benefits. Institutional stability and institutional performance are arguably as important to consider as the state of the economy is. Vlandas and Halikiopoulou's starting point is that economic insecurity, caused by unemployment, likely affects different groups on the labour market in different ways. This is especially the case for so-called labour market insiders—i.e. the ones in permanent employment—versus the outsiders—i.e. the unemployed. For the former group, the fear of getting laid off increases as unemployment levels goes up. But for the latter, lacking an income increases real—as well as perceived—levels of insecurity. Unemployment, then, is likely to exacerbate economic insecurity, which, in turn, drives support for non-mainstream parties. But as Vlandas and Halikiopoulou also note, we should consider any mediating effects certain labour market policies have on the unemployed. Such a structural focus can help us understand variation between cases that show growing levels of unemployment but with no obvious growth in



the support for anti-immigration parties. The authors' findings suggest how unemployment levels may on their own not be enough to explain differences in electoral fortunes. But when redundancy is combined with low levels of unemployment *benefits,* the above factors start to matter. Employment protection thus has a mediating effect on insecurity—as well as on support for the niche contender—but *only* when the share of foreigners is low. And, finally, Rydgren and van der Meiden provide an overtime comparative case study of the relatively late entry Sweden constitutes with regard to having an electorally successful radical right-wing party. Their submission highlights the transformation of the political space—from uni- to multidimensional—as an important factor for understanding why Swedish politics was so late in falling in line with developments observed elsewhere in Europe (see further Kriesi et al. 2006). Their article analyses important changes over the past 15 years, of which the most significant ones are the partial de-politicization of the economic, left–right dimension and a corresponding politicization of issues along the sociocultural axis. As long as economic politics dominated, Sweden was shielded against the mobilising attempts of radical right-wing parties. And as long as class identities were also strong, and class voting common, then working-class voters were not easily swayed away from the Social Democrats (although compare Evans and Tilley 2012). But in combination with growing convergence of mainstream party positions, these changes have opened up a space for niche contenders to exploit and become (increasingly) successful. Rydgren and van der Meiden's article thus emphasises the importance of vertical comparisons—that is, relatively detailed and overtime within the confinement of one or a few countries—as a complement to horizontal comparisons, that is, less detailed and across a larger amount of cases.

This symposium has been an attempt to reflect on how we conceptualise and define the extreme, niche, PRR and radical right categories. An important finding is that a shift appears to be underway in contemporary European politics. Several niche contenders are now increasingly difficult to distinguish from their mainstream equivalents. This is especially the case if distinctions are made solely on party stances on the immigration issue. A large chunk of the European mainstream is currently moving in the same direction as their more radical counterparts and has—to varying degrees—adopted similar approaches to immigration and integration as well (but not necessarily using the same rhetoric). Yet several fringe parties have also gone through important changes. The "new" direction they face in suggests a greater role played by the state. A key change identified by Valdez and Eger is their—almost anachronistic—move towards the economic centre-left. But several non-mainstream parties have also redefined their positions on sociocultural issues, especially those that relate to nationalism. This begs the question—is it a misnomer to refer to extreme or radical right-wing parties as being on the "right" when some of their positions have more in common with the centre-left? Previous research suggests that scholars should appreciate party system multidimensionality. Valdez and Eger's, as well as Rydgren and van der Meiden's, contributions further underscore this point. Placing mainstream—as well as non-mainstream—parties in such a space provides greater nuance and potentially furthers understanding of how party competition has changed. Scholars may equally want to revisit assumptions made regarding the (seemingly) unstoppable momentum that extreme or radical right-wing parties

experience at the moment. The contributions to this symposium thus highlight several avenues for future research to pursue. Szöcsik and Polyakova open up possibilities to further probe the interplay between mainstream and non-mainstream views on the EU. This relationship could be important to take into account when explaining the electoral successes of the latter. Yet we should not lose sight of the context parties compete and function in. Vlandas and Halikiopoulou, as well as Rydgren and van der Meiden, emphasise roles played by particular institutional configurations (labour market policies for the former, and politicization of cleavages for the latter). Such institutional approaches may help explain variation between cases but also tap into long-standing debates regarding structure and agency. Do parties take institutions into account when competing for votes? Or are they largely at the mercy of these forces with limited opportunities to exercise any form of agency? The authors' findings suggest that the latter may well be the case but they also point to the need for further (comparative) studies to be made.

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