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The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Meta-Analysis of Structural Factors

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**Abdelkarim Amengay and
Daniel Stockemer**

Abstract

In this meta-analysis, we summarize the results of 48 peer-reviewed articles on the radical right-wing vote in Western Europe. These results come from 48 peer-reviewed articles published from January 1990 until October 2017. We use the following inclusion criteria, the selected articles must focus on Western Europe, they must have the vote share of one or several radical right-wing parties as the dependent variable, and at least one structural variable as the independent variable. We find that more than 20 different structural variables have been tested. Most of them, like unemployment, reflect mitigate results in explaining the electoral support for radical right-wing parties. For others, like immigration, the statistical significance and direction of the relationship seem to be highly dependent on the type of proxies used. In fact, only a few variables, such as crime rates and the district magnitude seem to have a consistent effect on the vote share for radical right-wing parties.

Keywords

radical wing parties, structural factors, meta-analysis, Western Europe

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, the analysis of the electoral performances of radical right-wing parties (RWPs) has become a fertile field of study. Two types of approaches have dominated: (1) individual-level studies that aim at identifying personal characteristics of these parties' voters such as their sociodemographic profiles, psychological features, and attitudes (e.g. Arzheimer, 2008, 2009; Mayer, 2002). Second, and this will be the focus of this article, structural level studies evaluate the impact of structural/context-related factors (e.g. Betz, 1993; Golder, 2003). Thus, for more than 30 years, quantitative scholars have tested a broad range of structural factors, including, but not limited to, economics such as employment

School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada

Corresponding author:

Daniel Stockemer, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Canada.

Email: dstockem@uottawa.ca

statistics, socio-demographics such as immigration numbers, and politico-institutional factors such as electoral system type characteristics. For sure, some systematic reviews exist about the different explanations of the vote for RWPs (e.g. Husbands, 2002; Rydgren, 2007). Most recently, Muis and Immerzeel (2017) discuss demand and supply factors for the rise of populist right-wing movements and parties, without providing a systematic analysis of the factors that matter. Despite these helpful syntheses of the literature, there is, to our knowledge, no meta-analysis that summarizes the influence of structural factors on the radical right-wing vote share. In this study, we provide the first meta-analysis on the pertinence of various structural indicators in explaining the vote for RWPs.

We ask two research questions: first, what are the most important structural factors of the RWP vote? Second, which ones display the most consistent findings in accounting for the vote share of these parties? To construct our corpus, we do an extensive search of peer reviewed articles in the most important journals in Comparative- and European Politics covering the time period from January 1990 to October 2017.¹ To this list, we add articles from European national political science association journals.² We have three inclusion criteria: first, the dependent variable must measure the vote share of one or several radical RWPs at the structural or macro-level (i.e. the local, regional or national level). Second, the independent variables must be measured at the structural level, as well. Third, the analysis must be based on some type of regression model.³ In our search for structural articles, we tried to be as thorough as possible, that is, we did a manual search covering 28 journals (see footnote 1 and 2). We are confident to have included all articles that fulfill our search criteria in the 28 journals covered. Therefore, we are certain that our search strategy does produce a good sample for a fair meta-analysis as most well-known scholars and top leading journals of the field are represented in our data.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section introduces our research strategy. Section 3 then presents the most widely used structural indicators as well as their salience in explaining the radical right-wing vote. Finally, we provide some avenues for future research.

Research Strategy

As a meta-analysis, our research strategy is “an analysis of analyses” (Imbeau et al., 2001: 3) that aims “to analyze test results from previous studies through quantitative methods and to summarize the findings” (Smets and van Ham, 2013: 3). Thus, we work with “the findings themselves (rather than the raw data upon which they are based)” (Lau et al., 2007: 1176). While this can be done in different ways, “we use the most commonly used procedure of integrating research studies [namely] ‘vote-counting’” (Geys, 2006: 640). Using this method, we “sort the results of each study into positive significant, nonsignificant, and negative significant categories” (Wolf, 1986: 14). Therefore, we label a case “as a ‘success’ when the Beta coefficient of the tested independent structural variable is statistically significant and positive, a ‘failure’ when it’s statistically significant and negative, and as ‘no link’ when it’s not statistically significant at 0.10 level.” In a second step, we tally “the number of studies falling into each of these three categories” (Light and Smith, 1971: 433). By “counting the number of tests in each of these three categories”, we assume that modal categorization offers the best estimate of the direction of the true relationship between the independent variables (in our case the structural determinants of the radical right-wing vote) and the dependent variable RWP vote share (Light and Smith, 1971: 443).

Table 1. Table summarizing the trend of the publication of the articles used in the meta-analysis.

Periods	Number of articles published
1990–1994	1
1995–1999	4
2000–2004	5
2005–2009	14
2010–2014	16
2015 to October 2017	8

Our research strategy consisted in identifying all research articles that fit our criteria, that is, they are quantitative peer-reviewed articles published in English, which have a mainly West-European focus.⁴ In addition, the results must be derived from a regression analysis, and the models must be “pure” structural models without any individual independent variable included in the regression test. The restriction criteria to only use articles may constitute a source of bias. Yet, this should not compromise our results too much. First, scholars conducting any meta-analysis, which cover a wide variety of theoretical approaches and explanatory variables must make some choices for inclusion that are theoretical and practical (Smets and van Ham, 2013: 2). Theoretically, many influential pieces on the radical right are published in articles. In contrast to some books, articles in the major journals are peer reviewed; thus undergoing rigid quality control. More practically, it is also easier to locate and access articles because they can be conveniently downloaded online. Third and most importantly, the results of most influential books have generally been published before the publication of the book in article format using the same set of data and methodological approaches.

Using the above inclusion criteria, we identified 48 articles published between January 1990 and October 2017 comprising 332 models (Supplementary Annexe 1, available online). These articles vary in their geographical scope (some include only one country, others all Western European countries), the time periods covered, the type of regression technique used, the unit of analysis, and the number of the models presented: from one model (e.g. Baimbridge et al., 1994) to 48 models (e.g. Rydgren and Ruth, 2011; Table 1) (Supplementary Annexe 2, available online).

In the models that form our corpus, the dependent variables, as well as the independent variables, are operationalized in different ways. For the dependent variable, the main operationalization is the share of the vote obtained by the radical right either at the national level (e.g. Baimbridge et al., 1994; Bjørklund, 2007), or at the subnational level (municipal, departmental, etc.) (e.g. Kestilä and Söderlund, 2007). Other measurements include the level of support for RWPs among white voters (Bowyer, 2008), or the change in the electoral support for a specific radical RWP between two consecutive elections (e.g. Rydgren and Ruth, 2011).

Regarding the independent variables covered by this study, we summarize the influence of the encompassing concepts on the vote share for RWPs. For each concept, we provide the following information: (1) the number of studies that use this variable; (2) the number of times the respective variable is included; (3) the number of successes (i.e. number of times the regression coefficients are significant and in the expected direction); (4) the number of failures (i.e. the number of times the indicator shows a significant Beta

value, which runs counter to theoretical expectations); (5) the number of times there is no link (i.e. the relationship is not statistically significant); and (6) the success rate (i.e. the percentage of times that the variable in question meets the theoretical expectations and shows a statistically significant relationship in the expected direction).

The Structural Predictors of the Radical Wing's Vote

When it comes to the independent variables found in our data, our analysis shows that more than 20 structural variables have been tested since the 1990s. The use of each of these variables is related to one or more explanatory models or theories, which include, the modernization losers thesis, the crisis breeds extremism hypothesis or the contact hypothesis, to name only a few of them (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2000: 65; Van der Brug et al., 2005: 539). However, these studies rarely agree on what is the best indicator to operationalize the core explanatory concepts of the underlying theoretical frameworks. For example, scholars differ on which population-related variables they should employ in their models. For example, models use population size, population concentration, population stability, and population homogeneity (Dinas and van Spanje, 2011; Geys (2006); Kestilä and Söderlund, 2007). Below, we present the most frequently used predictors of the radical right-wing vote, their occurrence, and their success rate.

Sociocultural Variables

Immigration. Immigration is the most tested predictor of the radical right-wing vote in Western Europe (see Table 2). Given “their particular commitment to some sort of ethnic exclusionism” (Husbands, 1992: 268), their anti-immigrant rhetoric, and their labeling as anti-immigrant parties (e.g. Fennema, 1997), this finding is not particularly surprising. However, when it comes to the direction in the relationship between immigration and the RWP vote share, there are two contradictory theories. According to the dominant theory, the ethnic competition hypothesis: higher shares of immigrants should boost the radical right-wing vote. Thus, immigrants are seen by RWP voters as a threat to the ethnonational identity of the country, a significant cause of criminality and unemployment, and as abusers of the generosity of the welfare states of Western democracies (Rydgren, 2007: 244). However, a second opposite theoretical explanation, the contact theory affirms that higher immigration levels should harm the electoral success of RWPs. In line with this theory, a native person living in areas with considerable rates of immigrants is likely to interact with these foreigners and is thus expected to develop positive attitudes toward them rendering her less permeable to the RWP anti-immigration discourses (see Pettigrew, 2008). In the table that ensues (see Table 2), we have 369 occurrences of immigration-related variables, because in some studies and models more than one immigration-related variable is tested in the same study.⁵

Table 2 presents all the different proxies found in our data to account for the impact of immigration on the RWP vote share (we label as success, all coefficients that offer support for the ethnic competition hypothesis). We find inconclusive results. For example, if we generally look at immigration without taking into account its different operationalizations, we find a success rate of 38%. However, the relationship between immigration and the vote share for RWPs seems highly dependent on how immigration is operationalized. For example, the share of the foreign-born population shows a success rate of 57%,

Table 2. Table summarizing the effect of immigration on the RWP support.

Operationalization	# of studies	# of times the variable is tested	Success	Failure	No link	Success rate
Percent Foreign population	8	38	22	3	13	0.57
Immigration rate/share	8	28	12	0	16	0.42
Number of asylum seekers/refugees	3	20	9	0	11	0.45
Number of immigrants entering the country every year	3	33	8	11	14	0.24
Percentage of non-western immigrants	2	41	22	12	7	0.53
Population from Maghreb and Turkey	2	9	9	0	0	1.00
Yearly variation in the immigration rate	2	3	3	0	0	1.00
Share of EU/EFTA Immigrants	2	37	18	0	19	0.48
Share of Nordic Immigrants	2	37	5	8	24	0.13
Share of non-European Immigrants	2	37	9	6	22	0.24
Share of non-Nordic Immigrants	2	7	7	0	0	1.00
Share of western immigrants	1	27	0	1	26	0.00
Percentage of Black people	1	4	1	2	1	0.25
Percent Indians	1	4	0	0	4	0.00
Percent Pakistanis and Bangladeshis	1	4	2	2	0	0.50
Population from other countries than Maghreb and Turkey	1	3	0	1	2	0.00
Percent European immigrants	1	6	2	0	4	0.33
Percent immigrants in neighboring voting districts	1	16	7	4	5	0.43
Percent immigrants born outside EU	1	1	0	0	1	0.00
Percent non-native speakers	1	4	0	0	4	0.00
Percent non-European minority	1	4	1	2	1	0.25
Percent immigrants, who speak a non-European language	1	6	5	0	1	0.83
Total		369	142	52	175	0.38

EU/EFTA: European Union/European Free Trade Association.

Table 3. Table summarizing the effect of immigration on the vote share for the radical right depending on the level of analysis.

Level of analysis	# of studies	# of times the variable is tested	Success	Failure	No link	Success rate
Immigration (national)	12	69	27	12	30	0.39
Immigration (sub-national)	21	291	107	40	144	0.36
Immigration (both level)	1	9	8	0	1	0.88
Total	34	369	142	52	175	0.38

whereas the number of immigrants entering the country every year has a mere 24% success rate. Finally, and as Table 3 shows, the impact of immigration on the electoral success of the radical right does not appear to be dependent on the level of analysis. Aggregate

Table 4. Table summarizing the effect of crime on the radical wing vote.

	# of studies	# of times the variable is tested	Success	Failure	No link	Success rate
Crime	12	64	41	0	23	0.64

levels of immigration measured either at the national level or the sub-national level have a success rate that is almost identical (39% and 36%).

Crime. Crime is another major factor pushed by RWPs (Smith, 2010: 1472). In more detail, RWPs “place a large emphasis [in presenting themselves as] ... being tough on crime” (Coffé et al., 2007: 145) and blame other parties for being lax. These claims seem to resonate with voters, the higher the actual crime rate is in a geographical region the higher is the electoral support for RWPs (see Dinas and van Spanje, 2011). Table 4 finds support for this claim. In fact, crime rates seem to stimulate the electoral success of radical RWPs in 64% of the models (almost two third of the cases), and no case is in the failure category.

Socioeconomic Variables

Unemployment. Unemployment as the second mostly employed structural factor on the radical right-wing vote is central in accounts of cross-national variation in radical right-wing political support” (Kessler and Freeman, 2005: 264). The “economic hardship breeds extremism hypothesis” affirms that a dire economic situation either real or perceived fosters electoral support for the radical right (Lipset, 1961, 1981). The theory further states that “people are in competition over scarce resources, which may result in intergroup conflicts” (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2002: 123). In other words, when unemployment is high, immigrants are seen as competitors on available jobs by natives. Therefore, theory predicts that RWPs will enjoy a higher level of support in regions with high rates of unemployment or during periods that notice an increase in unemployment. However, the crisis breeds extremism hypothesis is not unabated. Rather, a minority view contends that unemployment may, in fact, harm the electoral performance of RWPs as “people may turn (back) to the more established and experienced mainstream parties in times of economic uncertainty” (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006: 434–435). However, this latter assumption is more an alternative explanation offered by scholars after finding a negative impact of unemployment on the vote for RWP in their tested models rather than a well-established theoretical frame (e.g. Arzheimer and Carter, 2006).⁶

Our results do not lend support to the economic hardship breeds extremism hypothesis. Table 5 highlights that unemployment rates only show the predicted relationship in 25% of the cases. In fact, in the overall majority (almost 60% of models), there is just no link between unemployment and the electoral success of the radical right (see also Rydgren, 2007: 249). Except for one model at the subnational level, the majority of studies also finds no support for the hypothesis that variation in unemployment triggers increased support for the radical right. In fact, regardless of the level of analysis, unemployment rates appear to be unrelated to the success of the radical right in the majority of cases.

Table 5. Table summarizing the effect of unemployment on the RWP support.

Operationalization	# of studies	# of times the variable is tested	Success	Failure	No link	Success rate
Unemployment rate	11 (national)	56	16	17	23	0.28
	21 (sub-national)	106	26	11	69	0.24
	1 (both levels)	9	0	0	9	0.00
	Sub-total	171	42	28	101	0.24
Unemployment variation	4 (national)	16	5	0	11	0.31
	1 (sub-national)	1	1	0	0	1.00
	Sub-total	17	6	0	11	0.35
Total		188	48	28	112	0.25

Table 6. Table summarizing the effect of income on the RWP support.

	# of studies	# of times the variable is tested	Success	Failure	No link	Success rate
GDP/income level	4	23	2	1	20	0.08

Material Affluence. Another operationalization of “socioeconomic marginalization” or “the losers of modernization hypothesis” is material wealth (Rydgren and Ruth, 2013: 715). Four studies in our dataset have tested the impact of income-related variables such as gross domestic product (GDP) per capita levels on the radical right-wing vote hypothesizing that (relatively) deprived regions should have higher support for the radical right (e.g. Poznyak et al., 2011). However, whatever the exact proxy used in the respective study is, there is no indication that the material affluence of the geographical region matters (see Table 6). Instead, our analysis reveals that in more than 80% of the models, there is no clear relationship between the two concepts.

Politico-Institutional Variables

Since elections take place in a “specific national context” which is defined, among others by the “institutional setting” (Spies and Franzmann, 2011: 1046), politico-institutional factors are unsurprisingly the second major type of explanations in explaining RWPs’ vote shares. The main institutional variables are electoral system related variables (Kessler and Freeman, 2005: 265). The main idea is that it is both “easier for extreme right parties to win seats themselves when the district magnitude is large and [...] easier for them to simply affect the election outcome” (Golder, 2003: 441). This stipulation is in concordance with “Duverger’s well-known proposition that single-member district, plurality methods foster two-party systems, while more proportional electoral procedures promote multi-partism” (Jackman and Volpert, 1996: 23); a feature, which should benefit the electoral fortune of RWPs. This meta-analysis finds support for this theoretical assumption. Whether operationalized by proportional representation (PR), the district magnitude, or the effective number of parties, more permissive electoral systems seem to bolster the radical right’s vote share.⁷

The second institutional factors found in some, albeit few, studies on the radical right is turnout. The theory states that low turnout should benefit the radical right considering

Table 7. Table summarizing the effect of electoral system related variables on the vote for RWP.

	# of studies	# of times the variable is tested	Success	Failure	No link	Success rate
Effective number of parties	7	27	15	1	11	0.55
Number of parties in local council	2	11	4	0	7	0.36
District magnitude	5	20	13	2	5	0.65
Number of electoral district	2	8	0	2	6	0.00
Proportional representation	1	7	7	0	0	1.00
Threshold	4	15	4	0	11	0.26
Disproportionality	3	17	2	1	14	0.11
Turnout	4	10	2	4	4	0.20
The vote for the radical right in previous elections	11	44	43	0	1	0.97
Presidential election	2	5	4	0	1	0.80
The toughness of mainstream parties on immigration issue	2	11	5	0	6	0.45
The ideological convergence of the mainstream left and right	2	6	1	0	5	0.16

that their core electorate tends to be disciplined on the day of elections (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006: 423). However, the meta-analysis does not confirm this finding. With only a success rate of 20%, turnout seems to be unrelated to the vote share of parties such as the French National Front (see Arzheimer and Carter, 2009). Finally, we summarize the influence of the radical right-wing vote in previous elections on the radical right-wing vote in subsequent elections. A success rate of 0.97, the highest among all the structural variables in our data, indicates that radical RWPs tend to perform strongly with almost certainty, where they used to perform strongly (Table 7).

The variables we have presented here are by far not exclusive. Rather, there are many more political or contextual variables employed in models on RWPs. However, as the number of models that test these variables is meager, it is hard to draw any consistent conclusion about their relevancy. These variables are the degree of polarization of the party system (e.g. Spies and Franzmann, 2011), the percentage of radical right-wing voters in the electorate (Van der Brug et al., 2005); the share of the vote of leftist parties in the previous government (Rydgren and Ruth, 2011) and the impact of a federalist or centralist nature of the state (Spies and Franzmann, 2011). Other variables reflect the composition and nature of the government, subsequent governments' ideological distance to one another (see Coffé et al., 2007), the ideological positions of the incumbent government (leftist or not) and, if an incumbent wins (Anderson, 1996). A third array of studies has added measures of the media visibility of RWPs, their leaders, and their favorite theme immigration (Vliegthart et al., 2012; Walgrave and Swert, 2004). What all these variables have in common is that they appear in one or at most two studies.

Conclusion and Future Research Avenues

Almost, 30 years of quantitative research with regard to the structural predictors of the vote share of RWPs has shown “inconsistent, often contradictory results” (Smith, 2010:

1473). This applies particularly to what has been seen for a long time as the “main predictors” of the radical right-wing vote share such as unemployment and immigration. For both variables, the empirical literature is far from reaching a consensus on each variable’s impact on the RWP vote share. Aside from the fact that the radical right has consistent geographical strongholds, there seem to be only two variables—crime rates and more proportionality of the electoral system—which appear to consistently boost the vote share of radical RWPs.

We can identify two problems from the literature. First, there is an absence of consensus (yet) on what variables are part of core model to explain geographical variation in the radical right-wing vote share in Western Europe (Arzheimer, 2009: 262). In addition, it seems that even when two scholars agree on what the structural variables are should be included in such core models, there is little chance that they will agree on what are the best proxies to operationalize them. Future research should try to establish a core model, ideally for all Western-Europe; if this is not possible for a subset of geographical units. Second, there is the problem of aggregation. Most studies covered in this meta-analysis “have been performed at high levels of aggregation such as the country or state-level” (Dinas and van Spanje, 2011: 660). Yet, “aggregate country- and regional-level data tend to mask the variation of demographic and economic contextual variables” (Bloom, 2013: 798).

Therefore, we do believe that future studies should use the smallest subnational analysis units available, like municipalities, communes or electoral districts. If unemployment, immigration or crime influences individuals’ propensity to support the radical right, it is most likely to impact citizens right where they live, in their neighborhood, in a situation where they are directly confronted with these societal phenomena. In contrast, national-level indicators provide large averages that might not be indicative of the situation on the ground. Even more promising, we see a high potential for multi-level analysis combining individual data with these lowest possible aggregation levels of the structural indicators. For example, such a research strategy will allow researchers to test how the interaction between agency-based variables and structural factors explains the level of support for radical RWPs, thus overcoming some of the legitimate critics that “pure structural” explanations face. To paraphrase Poznyak et al. (2011: 674), the combination of individual and contextual variables in the same equation seems the best alternative to ecological analysis.

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Notes

1. *American Journal of Political Science, American Political Science Review, British Journal of Political Science, Comparative European Politics, Comparative Politics, Comparative Political Studies, European Journal of Political Research, Electoral Studies, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Journal of Common Market Studies, Journal of Politics, Parliamentary Affairs, Party Politics, Perspectives on Politics, Political Behavior, Political Communication, Political Research Quarterly, Political Studies, Political Psychology, Public Opinion and Parties, Quarterly Journal of Political Science, Socio-Economic Review, and West European Politics.*
2. *Acta Politica, British Politics, French Politics, Italian Politics, German Politics.*
3. When an article presents both the results of “pure structural,” and multi-level models, we only include the structural models in our analysis.
4. Some articles included a limited number of Eastern or Central European countries. However, they are kept in our analysis as the data they use cover mainly Western-Europe.

5. The ethnic competition hypothesis has not only been operationalized by immigration. Rather, other measurements include population density (e.g. Bowyer, 2008; Coffé et al., 2007) or the level of urbanization (Poznyak et al., 2011). Also, a third array of studies (e.g. Dinas and van Spanje, 2011: 146) has tested the impact of social capital operationalized as the local branches of socio-cultural associations per capita. Yet, all these indicators occur in only a few studies and are thus not treated separately.
6. While unemployment and material affluence are the most used socioeconomic indicators, they are not the only ones. For instance, relative deprivation has been operationalized by the inflation rate (Anderson, 1996; Knigge, 1998), the percentage of the population that have reached a defined level of education (e.g. Bloom, 2013), income redistribution (Jesuit et al., 2009), income inequality (e.g. Dinas and van Spanje, 2011), the housing market conditions (Bowyer, 2008), economic growth rate (Swank and Betz, 2003; Van der Brug et al., 2005), or various measures of globalization (e.g. trade openness, capital movements, de-industrialization, etc.) (Swank and Betz, 2003).
7. The electoral system-related proxies that do not confirm these findings are the existence of a legal threshold and the disproportionality of the election result (see Table 6).

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Author Biography

Abdelkarim Amengay is a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa and Sciences Po, Paris. His research interests are radical right-wing parties, in particular, the French Front National. Abdelkarim has previously published articles in *French Politics*, *et la Revue française de science politique*.