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# The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy

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# The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy

CAS MUDDÉ

*In recent years more and more studies have pointed to the limitations of demand-side explanations of the electoral success of populist radical right parties. They argue that supply-side factors need to be included as well. While previous authors have made these claims on the basis of purely empirical arguments, this article provides a (meta)theoretical argumentation for the importance of supply-side explanations. It takes issue with the dominant view on the populist radical right, which considers it to be alien to mainstream values in contemporary western democracies – the ‘normal pathology thesis’. Instead, it argues that the populist radical right should be seen as a radical interpretation of mainstream values, or more akin to a pathological normalcy. This argument is substantiated on the basis of an empirical analysis of party ideologies and mass attitudes. The proposed paradigmatic shift has profound consequences for the way the populist radical right and western democracy relate, as well as for how the populist radical right is best studied. Most importantly, it makes demand for populist radical right politics rather an assumption than a puzzle, and turns the prime focus of research on to the political struggle over issue saliency and positions, and on to the role of populist radical right parties within these struggles.*

Today the politics of the radical right is the politics of frustration – the sour impotence of those who find themselves unable to understand, let alone command, the complex mass society that is the polity today.

The quote above could have been from practically any book on the contemporary radical right published in the late twentieth century. In fact, it dates from the early 1960s, and summarises Daniel Bell’s (1964: 42) assessment of the US radical right of the 1950s. It is indicative of a variety of dominant positions in the academic debate on the populist radical right, which I refer to here as the ‘normal pathology thesis’. Short and simple, the thesis holds that the radical right constitutes a pathology in (post-war) western society and its success can only be explained by ‘extreme conditions’

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(i.e. 'crisis'). Authors working within this paradigm often consider the radical right in psychological terms and focus almost exclusively on the demand-side of populist radical right politics.

Recent scholarship on the populist radical right has noted the limitations of a pure demand-side approach (e.g. Betz 2004; Carter 2005; Givens 2005; Norris 2005). Although demand-side factors do help explain the success of populist radical right parties in (Western) Europe, they often fail to account for significant differences between and within countries. Hence, authors have started to emphasise the importance of supply-side factors in the explanation of populist radical right party success. While this shift in focus has been mostly data-driven, i.e. inspired by empirical findings, this article will advance a (meta)theoretical argument for the importance of supply-side factors.

This article first provides a concise overview of the scholarship within the normal pathology paradigm, laying out the basic tenets of the thesis. It will argue that the thesis is not upheld by empirical analysis; i.e. populist radical right attitudes and ideological features are rather widespread in contemporary European societies. This calls for a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of the contemporary populist radical right: from a normal pathology to a pathological normalcy. The article finishes by outlining the most important consequences of this paradigmatic shift for the study of the contemporary populist radical right.

### **The Normal Pathology Thesis Explained**

According to traditional scholarship on the populist radical right, (western) democracy and radicalism in general, and extremism in particular, are based upon fundamentally opposed values. However, much of this scholarship makes no distinction between the two terms, i.e. extremism and radicalism, using them interchangeably. Obviously, this is incorrect. In fact, extremism and radicalism do not simply differ in degree, they differ in kind in their relationship to western democracy.

In line with traditional scholarship, I define *extremism* as the antithesis of democracy, i.e. as anti-democracy (e.g. Backes 1989). However, democracy is defined here in a minimal or procedural way. In the famous definition of the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter (1949: 250), democracy is 'an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realises the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will'. In short, extremism rejects the belief in popular sovereignty, normally executed by a 'one person, one vote' election system.

In contrast to some scholarship, notably the extremism-theoretical school, I define *radicalism* as being in opposition to *liberal* (or constitutional) democracy (Mudde 2007). Importantly, in this definition radicalism accepts procedural democracy, whereas extremism does not. However, radicalism

challenges both the liberal basis of it, notably the positive value of pluralism, and the constitutional limitations to popular sovereignty. The core of radicalism is monism, i.e. the tendency to treat cleavages and ambivalence as *illegitimate*.

Much scholarship on the ‘far’ (i.e. extreme and radical) right goes beyond the ideological opposition between radicalism and democracy, and considers the far right (in its various permutations) in psychological terms, mostly as a pathology of modern society. The most influential studies in this tradition are the psychoanalytical analyses of fascism, such as Wilhelm Reich’s *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1970; originally 1933) and Theodor W. Adorno and his collaborators’ *The Authoritarian Personality* (1969; originally 1950). Reich (1970: xiii, xiv) considered fascism to be ‘the basic emotional attitude of the suppressed man’ and argued that ‘[i]n its pure form fascism is the sum total of all *irrational* reactions of the average human being’.

As research on the post-war radical right was heavily influenced by studies of historical fascism, it comes as no surprise that the pathology approach initially also dominated that field. Early scholarship on the post-war American radical right seemed particularly affected. For example, Daniel Bell’s classic article ‘The Dispossessed’ (1964) provides an analysis of the ‘psychological stock-in-trade’, rather than the ideology, of the radical right, and is filled with references to pathologies like paranoia and conspiracy thinking. Similarly, Richard Hofstadter, author of the influential article ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’ (1964a), argued that the radical right ‘stands psychologically outside the frame of normal democratic politics’ (1964b: 102). The most influential study in this tradition is undoubtedly Seymour Martin Lipset’s *Political Man*, which had, among other things, this to say on the topic:

To sum up, the lower-class individual is likely to have been exposed to punishment, lack of love, and a general atmosphere of tension and aggression since early childhood – all experiences which tend to produce deep-rooted hostilities expressed by ethnic prejudice, political authoritarianism, and chiliastic transvaluational religion . . . .

In ‘normal’ periods, apathy is most frequent among such individuals, but they can be activated by crisis, especially if it is accompanied by strong millennial appeals. (Lipset 1960: 120, 122)

Many studies of the contemporary radical right in Europe have followed in this tradition. References to paranoia and other psychological disorders abound in the politically inspired studies, which unfortunately still occupy a prominent position in the field (particularly in Germany and France). But even serious scholarship regularly espouses such references. For example, Sabrina Ramet (1999: 4, 16) defines the radical right in terms of ‘cultural “irrationalism”’ and considers ‘an obsession with conspiracies’ as one of its

essential elements. And Rosanvallon and Goldhammer's account of 'the populist temptation' seems almost an exact copy of Hofstadter's position of more than three decades ago:

One way to make the term less ambiguous is to think of populism as a democratic *pathology* in two senses: as a *pathology*, first, of electoral-representative democracy and, second, of counter-democracy. Populism is not just an ideology. It is a *perverse* inversion of the ideals and procedures of democracy. (Rosanvallon and Goldhammer 2008: 265; emphasis added)

With regard to the literature on the contemporary populist radical right this position is most clearly and explicitly expressed in the 'normal pathology thesis' (Scheuch and Klingemann 1967). Scheuch and Klingemann's 'Theory of Right-wing Radicalism in Western Industrial Societies' remains, in fact, one of the most ambitious and comprehensive attempts at explaining the political success of radical right parties in post-war Europe, notably Germany. The following description of the 'normal pathology thesis' is therefore not to be seen as a summary of their theory, but rather as a simplified summary of one aspect of it, which has unfortunately been much more influential than the rest of the fascinating theoretical framework (see also Arzheimer and Falter 2002).

In brief, the normal pathology thesis holds that populist radical right values are alien to western democratic values, but that a small potential exists for them in all western societies (ca.10–15 per cent).<sup>1</sup> Hence, the authors speak of a 'normal pathology'. Within this paradigm, the support of populist radical right parties is based on 'structurally determined pathologies' (Scheuch and Klingemann 1967: 18). Populist radical right attitudes will only become politically relevant under 'extreme conditions' (*Extrembedingungen*) (Scheuch *et al.* 1967: 86). Klingemann (1968: 6) later described the mechanisms of the thesis as follows:

In industrial societies, which are subject to rapid social change, we must expect to find typical tensions. Values from the field of primary relationships and those from secondary institutions arising from the fundamental requirements of changing industrial societies, tend to contradict each other. ...

The rapid change of environmental conditions exercises a constant pressure which forces the individual either to re-adapt continuously to his environment, or to participate in actively changing this environment.

... as they fail to fulfill their functions of coping with everyday life, the individual with a rigid value and orientation system reacts to changes in the environmental conditions with increasing worry (anxiety, aggressiveness, etc.).

Some of the most prominent authors whose work can be located within the normal pathology paradigm are Hans-Georg Betz, Frank Decker, and Michael Minkenberg.<sup>2</sup> Betz (1998: 8), for example, argues that '[t]he success of the radical populist right thus reflects to a large extent the psychological strain associated with uncertainties produced by large-scale socioeconomic and sociocultural changes'. Explicit support for Scheuch and Klingemann's normal pathology thesis is particularly strong in the German (language) literature (see, among many more, Grumke 2004; Jaschke 2001; Neugebauer 2001). However, many authors, who might never have read the original article, work within its key parameters. Helmuth Gaus (2004), for instance, explains the success of the radical right by 'underlying insecurities and fears' that come out in cyclical crisis situations. And Lee McGowan (2002: 210) concludes that '[i]n retrospect, it would be naïve to assume that organized right-wing extremism would have withered away completely [in post-war German, CM]. Pockets of support endure across the country. The people for the most part live in the past'.

In conclusion, the key foundations of the normal pathology thesis have dominated the academic study of the post-war populist radical right in (Western) Europe. They include at least the following aspects: (1) populist radical right values are alien to western democracies; (2) a small potential continues to exist in all societies; and (3) support for populist radical right parties is explained by 'structurally determined pathologies', which are triggered by 'extreme conditions' (i.e. crises).

### **The Normal Pathology Thesis and Academic Research**

The paradigm of the normal pathology thesis has profound effects on the academic study of the populist radical right. In its most extreme form, scholars study the phenomenon unrelated to mainstream democratic politics; that is, they do not use mainstream concepts and theories, as the populist radical right is a pathology, and can thus only be explained outside of the 'normal'. In most cases, this decision is at least as much political as it is scientific. Authors believe that by using mainstream concepts and theories, the scientist legitimises the populist radical right.

This extreme interpretation was particularly prevalent in the study of 'neo-fascism' in France, Germany, and the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s. Many authors would focus almost exclusively on the historical links of the populist radical right, i.e. the link to pre-war fascism and Nazism (e.g. Schulz 1990; Van Donselaar 1991). The assumption was that the post-war populist radical right had to be understood as a remnant of a distant past, not as a consequence of contemporary developments.

The more moderate interpretation of the thesis has dominated studies of the electoral success of the populist radical right at least until the late 1990s. It became more broadly popular through the works of scholars integrating insights of the study of political parties (most notably the Greens) into the

field (notably Betz 1994; Ignazi 1992; Kitschelt and McGann 1995). In this moderate form, mainstream concepts and theories are employed, but the populist radical right is still perceived as an anomaly of contemporary western democracies. Hence, the key puzzle in the normal pathology paradigm is that of demand: why does a popular demand for populist radical right politics exist?

The two general answers that are offered, protest and support, are based upon a similar assumption: under 'normal' circumstances only a tiny part of the population in western democracies evinces a demand for populist radical right politics. Hence it is necessary to search for those 'abnormal' circumstances in which 'populist radical right attitudes' spread more widely. Most scholars find the answer in modern interpretations of the classic modernisation thesis (see Mudde 2007: 203–5).

Almost all major theories of populist radical right support within the normal pathology thesis refer to some form of crisis linked to some type of modernisation process and its consequences: e.g. globalisation, risk society, post-Fordist economy, post-industrial society (e.g. Beck 1992; Holmes 2000; Loch and Heitmeyer 2001; Swank and Betz 2003). The idea is always the same: society is transforming fundamentally and rapidly, this leads to a division between (self-perceived) 'winners' and 'losers', and the latter will vote for the populist radical right out of protest (anger and frustration) or support (intellectual rigidity). In short, under conditions of massive societal change, the 'losers of modernisation' will vote for populist radical right parties (e.g. Bell 1964; Berezin 2009; Betz 1994; Decker 2004; Lipset 1955; Minkenberg 1998).

Importantly, within this approach populist radical right parties, and actually political actors in general, hardly play any role. The only internal factor that is at times recognised is a charismatic leader (Mudde 2007: 260–63). This is not only in line with Max Weber's interpretation of charismatic leadership (1987[1919]), although few authors refer explicitly to his theory, it is also in full accordance with the normal pathology thesis. As in 'normal' politics voting should be rational, based on ideology or at least identity (cleavage), not on an irrational bond with an individual.

In short, within the normal pathology thesis the populist radical right tends to be studied from the perspective of either fascism (extreme) or crisis (moderate). The prime focus is on explaining demand, which should be low under 'normal' conditions. The supply-side of politics is almost completely ignored, as is the role of the populist radical right itself. As far as internal supply does enter the equation, it is in the form of charismatic leadership, again a perceived pathological remnant of a dark past.

### **The Normal Pathology Thesis Assessed**

As so often with popular viewpoints, few people have ever tested the validity of the normal pathology thesis. Scheuch and Klingemann themselves laid



out the theoretical framework in 1967, but never provided empirical evidence for the fundamental arguments. While they were the first to apply survey material to the study of the radical right, their empirical tests aimed mainly at providing an insight into ‘the’ NPD voter (e.g. Klingemann 1968; Klingemann and Pappi 1968). Later scholars working within the paradigm, many of whom may never have read this rather obscure publication, seemed to treat the thesis as proven, or as received wisdom that no longer requires empirical proof.<sup>3</sup>

In this section I assess the claim that the populist radical right is a normal pathology at two levels, the ideological and the attitudinal. First, I analyse whether the ideological core of the populist radical right – defined as a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde 2007) – is indeed at odds with the basic values of western societies. Second, I examine whether populist radical right values are really shared by only a small minority of the European population.

### *The Ideological*

The key feature of the populist radical right ideology is *nativism*, i.e. an ideology which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state (Mudde 2007: 19). Nativist thinking has a long history in western societies, notably in the US, with movements like the ‘Know Nothings’ dating back to the early nineteenth century (e.g. Bennett 1990; Higham 1955).

Historically and ideologically, nativism is closely linked to the idea of the nation-state, a nationalist construction that has become a cornerstone of European and global politics.<sup>4</sup> The idea of the nation-state holds that each nation should have its own state and, although this is often left implicit, each state should have only one nation. This idea is so prevalent that some authors even speak of a ‘methodological nationalism’ underlying the dominant contemporary view on society. According to Daniel Chernilo (2006: 129), ‘[m]ethodological nationalism presupposes that the nation-state is the necessary and natural form of society in modernity and that the nation-state becomes the *organised principle* around which the whole project of modernity coheres’.

Various European constitutions explicitly state that their country is linked to one nation; for example, the Slovak preamble starts with ‘We, the Slovak nation’, while article 4.1 of the Romanian constitution states that ‘[t]he foundation of the state is based on the unity of the Romanian people’ (in Mudde 2005). The idea of national self-determination is even enshrined in chapter 1, article 1 of the United Nations Charter, which explicitly calls for respect for the ‘self-determination of peoples’.

This is not to claim that all references to national self-determination are necessarily expressions of nativism. For example, article 1 of the amended Constitution of Ireland states

The Irish nation hereby affirms its inalienable, indefeasible, and sovereign right to choose its own form of Government, to determine its relations with other nations, and to develop its life, political, economic and cultural, in accordance with its own genius and traditions.

However, further articles express a fairly open attitude to non-natives, including ‘the firm will of the Irish Nation, in harmony and friendship, to unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities and traditions’ (article 3).

But even where European states are not nativist, they will use ‘banal nationalism’. With this term, Michael Billig (1995: 6) refers to everyday life ‘ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced’. Simply stated, citizens in western countries are daily reminded of their ‘national identity’ through a plethora of more or less subtle hints, ranging from the celebration of Independence Day, through the name of their media outlets (e.g. *Irish Times*, *British Broadcasting Corporation*, *Hrvatska Radio Televizija*), to history education in schools. Although banal reminders, they are based on the constituting idea of the nation-state.<sup>5</sup>

*Authoritarianism*, the belief in a strictly ordered society in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely (Mudde 2007: 23), is a feature not even exclusive to the ideological core of the populist radical right. Most notably, ‘the importance of order and authority’ is a core staple of conservatism (Layton-Henry 1982: 1; Pilbaum 2003). The conservative political theorist Roger Scruton (1980: 19), for instance, argues that ‘[i]t is through the ideal of authority that the conservative experiences the political world’, while fellow conservative Robert Nisbet (1986: 34) states that ‘[a]uthority is, along with property, one of the two central concepts in conservative philosophy’. According to Roger Eatwell (1992: 22), within conservatism ‘man is seen as aggressive and in need of authority’.

Moreover, authoritarianism is a key aspect of both secular and religious thinking, ranging from (proto-)liberals like Thomas Hobbes to socialists like Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and from Roman Catholicism to Orthodox Christianity. According to Lenin (1961: 412), for example, ‘Absolute centralization and the strictest discipline of the proletariat constitute one of the fundamental conditions for victory over the bourgeoisie’. With regard to religion, Bob Altemeyer (1988: 202) concludes in his influential book on authoritarianism: ‘Generally speaking, Christian religions (among others) teach the child to obey a supernatural authority and, more to the point, an earthly authority system that acts in Its name’.

The third and final ideological feature is *populism*, here defined as a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale*, i.e. the general will of the people (Mudde 2007: 23). While the populist ideology has much deeper roots in the US than in (Western) Europe (e.g. Goodwyn 1976; Kazin 1995), key elements are clearly linked to fundamental values of western societies in general.

As Margaret Canovan has so eloquently argued, democracy has a redemptive and a pragmatic side; the former emphasises the ideal of *vox populi vox dei* (or ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’), the latter the importance of institutions. ‘Inherent in modern democracy, in tension with its pragmatic face, is faith in secular redemption: the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people’ (Canovan 1999: 11). Populism builds upon this ‘democratic promise’ (e.g. Goodwyn 1976; Mény and Surel 2002). Interpreting ‘the people’ as a homogenous moral entity, populists argue that *the* common sense of *the* people should always take precedence and cannot be curtailed by ‘undemocratic’ institutional constraints such as constitutional protections of minorities.

Populism’s anti-establishment sentiments are also closely connected to broadly shared beliefs in western societies. These range from Lord Acton’s famous adagio ‘power corrupts’ to the negative image of humanity so essential to Christianity and conservatism (e.g. in the Original Sin).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the fact that evangelical Christianity plays a much greater role in the culture and politics of the US than in Europe, might be part of the explanation of the broader and deeper anti-establishment sentiments in that country. Moreover, whereas much of Western Europe had a more elite-driven process of democratisation and state formation, based upon a strong central authority and an elitist distrust of the people, in the US the same processes were driven by ‘We, the People of the United States’ and by a distrust in central government shared by both the masses and the elites, including the Founding Fathers.

### *The Attitudinal*

The previous section has established that the constituent features of the populist radical right ideology are to a large extent in line with key tenets of mainstream ideologies. Here, we will look into the overlap with mass attitudes. We mainly use the various *Eurobarometer* surveys, which is not only the only regular EU-wide socio-political survey, but it has also shown a particular interest in issues and values of relevance to this study.

Although *nativism* is not the same as racism, whatever that may actually mean to respondents, studies like the Eurobarometer provide ample evidence of extreme nativist attitudes within Europe. For example, *Special Barometer 113* (‘Racism and Xenophobia: Human Rights and Immigration

in the European Union'), of December 1997, found that '[o]nly one in three of those interviewed said they felt they were "not at all racist." One in three declared themselves "a little racist", and a surprising one third openly expressed "quite or very racist feelings"' (2).

More concretely, 65 per cent of EU-15<sup>7</sup> citizens agree with the statement 'our country has reached its limits; if there were to be more people belonging to these minority groups we would have problems' (7). Almost two-thirds believe that all illegal immigrants should be sent back, while 80 per cent believe illegal immigrants 'convicted of serious offences' should be repatriated (7). Even more radical than (most) populist radical right parties, some 20 per cent support 'wholesale repatriation', i.e. they agree with the statement that 'all immigrants, whether legal or illegal, from outside the European Union and their children, even those born here, should be sent back to their country of origin' (7).

Similar figures are reported in the European Social Survey (ESS) of 2003, which collected survey data for 18 Western European countries and regions (see Ivarsflaten 2005: 27). Most strikingly, a staggering 80 per cent of the respondents believe that 'immigrants committing serious crime should leave'; note that this does not refer to 'illegal' immigrants, like the Eurobarometer question above. Moreover, large minorities agree that 'immigrants committing any crime should leave' (46 per cent), 'government should not treat refugee applications generously' (45 per cent), and that 'immigrants that are long-term unemployed should leave' (43 per cent). Even the extreme statement that 'immigrants should not have same rights as everyone else' finds support among 19 per cent of the respondents.

As far as positive attitudes towards the ingroup are concerned, many studies take the 'proud' question as an indicator. A staggering 85 per cent of EU-25 respondents are very or fairly proud to be Dutch/Swedish/etc. (*Eurobarometer* 66, September 2007). This ranges from near unanimity in Cyprus (98 per cent) to 71 per cent in Germany. It has to be noted that the 'proud' question is a very soft indication of nationalism, let alone nativism, which does not correlate very strongly with other (more negative) indicators. Moreover, no less than 59 per cent of the EU-25 respondents are also very or fairly proud to be European.

Regarding *authoritarianism*, surveys show an even stronger overlap between mass attitudes and populist radical right positions. According to *Special Barometer 181* ('Public Safety, Exposure to Drug-Related Problems and Crime'), of May 2003, 78 per cent of EU-15 citizens believe that young people would commit less crime if they were taught better discipline by their parents or at school (9); ranging from 65 per cent in Austria to 90 per cent in France (51). Similarly, 62 per cent of EU-15 people believe that young people would commit less crime if jail sentences were tougher; however, varying between 37 per cent in Sweden to 75 per cent in Ireland (10). Although 55 per cent of EU citizens think their local police 'are doing a good job' in fighting crime, 74 per cent believe that 'better policing' would

reduce crime in their area (47). Finally, a staggering 85 per cent of the EU-25 populations agree with the statement: 'Nowadays there is too much tolerance. Criminals should be punished more severely.' This ranges from 70 per cent in Denmark to 97 per cent to Cyprus (*Eurobarometer* 66).

The ideological feature of *populism* can only be studied through its anti-elite or anti-establishment side. As the booming literature on *Politikverdrossenheit* has argued, and partly proven, growing groups of EU citizens hold negative attitudes towards the main institutions of their national democratic system, though not to the democratic system as such (cf. Dahl 2000). In fact, in 1999, 40 per cent of the EU-15 people were 'not very satisfied' or 'not at all satisfied' with their national democracy; ranging from 70 per cent in Italy to 22 per cent in the Netherlands (*Eurobarometer* 52, April 2000). Even though average satisfaction with democracy fluctuates over time, and there is no clear Europe-wide downward trend in satisfaction (e.g. Wagner *et al.* 2009), surveys do show consistently that significant minorities of Europeans are not very/at all satisfied with their national democracy.

Similarly, trusts levels of key democratic institutions are quite low. According to the *Eurobarometer* 66 (August 2006), the army is the most trusted institution (69 per cent), followed by the police (66 per cent). The three least trusted institutions are the national parliament (33 per cent), the national government (30 per cent), and political parties (17 per cent). While there also some people with no opinion, the vast majority of EU citizens do not trust the main political institutions of their country. Notably, 58 per cent and 62 per cent 'tend not to trust' their national parliament and government, respectively (*Eurobarometer* 69, June 2008). And a staggering 75 per cent tend not to trust their political parties (*Eurobarometer* 59, April 2003).

Regarding the issue of corruption, a prominent staple of populist radical right propaganda, the *Special Eurobarometer* 291 ('The Attitudes of Europeans towards Corruption'), of April 2008, reported that 75 per cent of EU-27 citizens totally agree or tend to agree that corruption is a major problem in their country. In countries like Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Romania some 75 per cent even 'totally agree' with the statement. To be fair, there is a north-south divide here, as in Northern Europe only a minority believe that corruption is a major problem in their country: around a quarter in Denmark and Finland and just under half in Sweden and the Netherlands.

According to the *Special Eurobarometer* 245 ('Opinions on Organized, Cross-National Border Crime and Corruption'), 59 per cent of the EU-25 believe that giving or receiving bribes is not successfully prosecuted. Of the categories of people that are believed to be corrupt, 'politicians at national level' top the list, with 60 per cent of the EU-25 respondents thinking they are corrupt; ranging from a low of 29 per cent in Denmark to a high of 69 per cent in Slovenia. Politicians at the regional level (47 per cent) and at the

local level (45 per cent) are ranked fourth and fifth. Although the *Special Eurobarometer 291* reports lower figures, they are still significant minorities of 46 per cent (national politicians) and 37 per cent (regional and local politicians).

Finally, a specific target of populist radical right propaganda is the European Union, which is described as a thoroughly corrupt bureaucratic Moloch. Surveys show that this view is shared by a substantial majority of Europeans. The *Special Eurobarometer 291* reports that no less than 66 per cent of citizens of the EU-27 believe that corruption exists within EU institutions; which is actually down from 71 per cent in 2005. Interestingly, the countries with the highest scores, Germany (81 per cent) and Sweden (80 per cent), score among the lowest with regard to corruption in their own country (though this is not a general relationship).

### **From Normal Pathology to Pathological Normalcy**

The preceding analysis has shown that the normal pathology thesis does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. Populist radical right ideas are not alien to the mainstream ideologies of western democracy and populist radical right attitudes are not just shared by a tiny minority of the European population. In fact, the populist radical right is better perceived as a *pathological normalcy*, to stay within the terminology of Scheuch and Klingemann – well connected to mainstream ideas and much in tune with broadly shared mass attitudes and policy positions.

The pathological normalcy thesis does not entail that the populist radical right is part of the mainstream of contemporary democratic societies. Rather, it holds that, ideologically and attitudinally, the populist radical right constitutes a radicalisation of mainstream views (Betz 2003; Minkenberg 2001). The empirical argument is that key aspects of the populist radical right ideology are shared by the mainstream, both at the elite and mass level, albeit often in a more moderate form. Not surprisingly, this paradigmatic shift has a profound influence on (1) the relationship between the populist radical right and western democracy, and, consequently, (2) the study of the populist radical right.

With regard to the relationship between the populist radical right and western democracy, the key difference is not to be defined in kind, i.e. by fundamental opposition (i.e. antithesis), but in degree, i.e. by moderate versus radical versions of roughly the same views. Moreover, populist radical right attitudes and ideas are not marginal under normal conditions; they are fairly widespread, if often in a more moderate form than expressed by the populist radical right parties. How broadly shared the populist radical right core ideology is cannot (yet) be established on the basis of the available datasets. This would require a complex measurement model, encompassing a collection of multiple indicators for all three (multifaceted)

ideological features,<sup>8</sup> rather than simplistic indicators like left–right self-placement (e.g. Winkler and Schumann 1988) or support for racist movements.<sup>9</sup>

### **Pathological Normalcy and Academic Research**

The paradigmatic shift from normal pathology to pathological normalcy has profound consequences for the academic study of the populist radical right. First and foremost, it means that the populist radical right should be studied on the basis of concepts and theories of mainstream political science.<sup>10</sup> Second, the prime focus of the research should not be on explaining demand, as this is generated ‘naturally’ by the complex multiethnic western democracies, but on explaining supply. This is not to say that demand-side explanations are irrelevant, but rather that they are best left to explain the existence of populist radical right attitudes at the mass level, not the electoral success of populist radical right parties.

For populist radical right parties, the political struggle is not so much about attitudes, but about issues. After all, with regard to the issues that matter, i.e. the populist radical right trinity of corruption–immigration–security, a significant part of the population already shares their positions to a large extent.<sup>11</sup> The key point is that, traditionally, ‘their’ issues have not dominated the political struggle in most western democracies. Populist radical right parties do not focus primarily on socio-economic issues, as most traditional parties do, but on socio-cultural issues, like the other new party family, the Greens.

Within the pathological normalcy paradigm, the success and failure of populist radical right parties is, first and foremost, explained by the struggle over issue saliency and positions. As Paul Lucardie (2000: 175) puts it, populist radical right parties are purifiers, referring to ‘an ideology that has been betrayed or diluted by established parties’, rather than prophets, ‘which articulate a new ideology’. They do not have to sway voters to a new issue position, they have to shift them to a new issue: away from the socio-economic issues, like (un)employment, and towards the socio-cultural issues, like immigration. Therefore, the main struggle of the populist radical right party family is to increase the saliency of ‘their’ issues, i.e. corruption, immigration, and security.

The increased opportunities for electoral success for all populist radical right parties, at least since the mid 1980s, is to a large extent explained by the broader shift away from classic materialist politics towards some form of post-materialist politics (Inglehart 1977), or at least a combination of the two. Within this process, the populist radical right itself played only a marginal role. Rather, it was to a large extent an unintended reaction to the success of the new left in the late 1960s and 1970s, which led to a neoconservative backlash in the late 1970s and 1980s (Ignazi 1992). This development not only created electoral space for the populist radical

right, it also opened up a relatively new and 'level' playing field, i.e. competition over socio-cultural issues like corruption, immigration, and security.

The fact that some populist radical right parties have been able to use these opportunities, and other have not, must be explained by the concept of 'issue ownership' (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996); or, more accurately for non-valence issues, issue position ownership.<sup>12</sup> While the new playing field was level in all countries, the struggle for issue position ownership varied. In some countries, new or reformed (right-wing) parties could capture issue position ownership on corruption, immigration, and security even before a populist radical right party was able to establish itself. In most unsuccessful cases, however, it was the populist radical right party itself that kept it from achieving issue position ownership. Because of a lack of organisation and personnel, these parties were haunted by internal strife and public scandal, making them an unattractive political actor despite their favourable issue position.

Where the populist radical right was able to establish issue position ownership on one or more of their golden issues – corruption, immigration, security – the key explanation for their success was internal. While it was mostly the established parties (forced by the public and the media) that created the conditions for their electoral breakthrough, it was the populist radical right parties themselves that ensured their electoral persistence. Broadly stated, they did this through a combination of leadership, organisation, and propaganda.

Two good examples of populist radical right that successfully combined these three factors are the French Front National (FN) and the Belgian Vlaams Blok/Belang (VB). During its heyday, the FN had a powerful combination of charismatic leadership by Jean-Marie Le Pen, who attracted voters from across the political spectrum, and managerial leadership by Bruno Mégret, who organised the party into a powerful machine. The party's propaganda was famed inside and outside of the country; in fact, many other populist radical right parties adopted FN propaganda (e.g. Rydgren 2005). One of these parties was the VB, copying not just posters but even whole programmes,<sup>13</sup> and which had in Filip Dewinter both a charismatic and managerial leader.

While both examples seem fairly straightforward, much more empirical study is needed to get a clearer view on what exactly distinguishes successful from unsuccessful party organisation, leadership, and propaganda. Moreover, the histories of both parties show that these factors are no guarantee for everlasting electoral success. The FN got involved in a fierce internal power struggle between Le Pen and Mégret in the late 1990s, leading to a split in the party and a consequent loss of support (albeit much less than expected). And although the VB has not yet experienced a serious split, the party has recently lost its first elections and internal divisions have emerged that could threaten its future success.



## **Conclusion**

In recent years more and more studies of the populist radical right have pointed to the limitations of demand-side explanations. Instead, they emphasise the need to include supply-side factors in the analyses as well (e.g. Carter 2005; Givens 2005; Norris 2005). However, while previous authors have made these claims purely on the basis of empirical arguments, this article provides the first (meta)theoretical argumentation for the importance of supply-side explanations.

The study of the populist radical right has been dominated by the normal pathology thesis, i.e. the belief that the populist radical right is a pathology of contemporary western democracies, which has only limited support under 'normal' circumstances. Within this paradigm, mass demand for populist radical right parties constitutes the main puzzle, and can only be explained by some form of modernisation theory-related crisis.

As has been shown, the normal pathology thesis does not hold up under empirical scrutiny. The key features of the populist radical right ideology – nativism, authoritarianism, and populism – are not unrelated to mainstream ideologies and mass attitudes. In fact, they are best seen as a radicalisation of mainstream values. Hence, the populist radical right should be considered a pathological normalcy, not a normal pathology.

This paradigmatic shift has profound consequences for the study of the populist radical right. Widespread demand is a given, rather than the main puzzle, in contemporary western democracies. Provocatively stated, the real research question should be: why have so few parties been successful given the generally fertile breeding ground? The answer is to be found in the supply-side of issue politics, most notably in the struggles over the saliency of issues (particularly for the phase of electoral breakthrough) and over issue position ownership (especially for the phase of electoral persistence). This can only be truly understood if the populist radical right party itself is brought (back) into the analysis and explanation.

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## Notes

1. The original article does not specify the size of the population with radical right attitudes, but in another article Scheuch (1967: 10) speaks of 'a residuum of ca. 10% up to 15%'.
2. Other work that implicitly or explicitly builds upon Scheuch and Klingemann's normal pathology thesis include Nagle (1970), Armingeon (1995) and Winkler and Schumann (1998).
3. A notable exception is the chapter by Arzheimer and Falter (2002) in the *Festschrift* for Hans-Dieter Klingemann. Not only do they put the normal pathology thesis to the test, they actually try to test the thesis in all its complexity.
4. Andreas Wimmer (2002: 2), for example, argues that '[d]emocracy, citizenship and national self-determination became the indivisible trinity of the world order of nation-states'.
5. Even in clearly multinational states or federations one can find such banal nationalism. The state of Belgium, for example, entails two large cultural-linguistically different groups (Dutch speakers and French speakers; as well as a tiny group of German speakers), which do not even share one (monolingual) public space. At the same time, the Belgian Constitution explicitly states that '[a]ll power emanates from *the Nation*' (article 33; emphasis added).
6. The influential American conservative thinker Peter Viereck (1949: 30) has argued that conservatism should be 'the political secularization of the doctrine of original sin'.
7. EU-12 refers to the EU between 1980 and 1995, when it included the following 12 member states: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. In 1995, Austria, Finland and Sweden joined, transforming it into the EU-15. In 2004, 10 new, mainly East European countries joined (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia), making it the EU-25. With the addition of Bulgaria and Romania, in 2007, the European Union is currently known as the EU-27.
8. Few attempts at constructing such multidimensional measurement models have been undertaken so far. The few existing models are heavily influenced by the models, not the theory, of Adorno and his collaborators. Unfortunately, they have been developed for different, if related, concepts (notably the 'extreme right' and 'far right'), and have been applied and tested in only limited local or regional contexts (e.g. De Witte *et al.* 1994; Meijerink *et al.* 1995, 1998).
9. For example, *Special Eurobarometer 41* on 'Racism and Xenophobia' (November 1989) asked respondents whether they approved with 'movements in favour of racism'. Obviously, 'only' 4 per cent of EU-12 citizens approved 'completely', and 6 per cent 'to some extent' (16).
10. A recent example, using mainstream coalition theories to explain the government participation of radical right parties, is De Lange (2008).
11. Hence, the finding that xenophobic attitudes are a rather poor explanator of populist radical right voting behaviour (e.g. Rydgren 2008).
12. In short, party A *owns* position X (on issue Y) when a large part of the electorate that (1) cares about issue Y and (2) holds position X, trusts party A to be the most competent party to shift policies (directly or indirectly) towards issue position X.
13. The VB copied most of its infamous anti-immigrant 70-Point Program from the FN's 50-Point Program (see Mudde 2000).

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