

## Shifting Welfare Policy Positions: The Impact of Radical Right Populist Party Success Beyond Migration Politics

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**Article — Published Version**

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Representation

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# Shifting Welfare Policy Positions: The Impact of Radical Right Populist Party Success Beyond Migration Politics

Werner Krause  and Heiko Giebler 

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## ABSTRACT

Political parties respond strategically to the electoral success of radical right populist parties (RRPPs). While previous research has focused on programmatic responses on cultural conflict issues, we are expanding the research on policy position adaption to the economic left-right issue of welfare-state politics. Actual and potential supporters of RRPPs do not only feel threatened by migration or liberal conceptions of society but are also often confronted with real or perceived socio-economic decline. Therefore, we argue that established parties do not only react by changing their socio-cultural policy offers but also by adjusting their welfare state policy positions. Based on parties' voter potentials and issue ownership theory, we investigate whether such changes are especially pronounced for left-of-center parties. Analysing data from 18 West European countries since 1985, we find that non-RRPPs indeed advocate more leftist positions on welfare state policies in response to increasing electoral support for RRPPs. This effect is especially pronounced for economically left-of-centre parties as these parties might consider this to be a promising strategy to win back voters from the populist radical right.


## KEYWORDS

Radical right populist parties; party competition; welfare; party positions; left-right

## Introduction

The ongoing success of radical right populist parties (RRPPs)<sup>1</sup> is not only of major interest in scientific and public discourse, but – presumably – has a substantial impact on various relevant aspects of the functioning of democracies. On the one hand, some scholars conclude that RRPPs fill representational gaps, advocate the people's sovereignty, or mobilise citizens to vote (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Kriesi, 2014; Mouffe, 2005). On the other hand, the majority of evaluations identify dysfunctional consequences: the erosion of liberal democracy and open society as well as a transformation of political debates from fact- to emotion-driven discourses promoting scapegoating and over-simplification and undermining the legitimacy of representative democracy in general (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Mudde, 2007; Müller, 2016). In this paper, we investigate RRPPs' impact in a more direct way, looking at what is at the heart of many of the effects mentioned above. We examine how these parties influence the political positioning of non-RRPPs on the traditional socio-economic issue dimension. More specifically, we investigate reactions

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regarding welfare-state issues – one of the core topics of the socio-economic left-right dimension. Expanding Mudde's (2004) assessment, the populist zeitgeist is not only infiltrating mainstream politics but also changing political competition, which has a major impact on the functioning of representative democracy in the twenty-first century.

There are already several studies on the impact of RRPPs on political competition and policy positions of non-RRPPs – especially concerning mainstream parties (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018; Han, 2015; van Spanje, 2010). With only a few exceptions (Meijers, 2017; Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016), these studies focus on positional shifts and strategies related to RRPPs' core issues of cultural protectionism. While the results of these studies in the realm of 'New Politics' are conclusive (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017, p. 918), the overall picture remains incomplete as the underlying notions of political competition are oversimplified. Even though the cultural conflict dimension has become much more important in recent decades and despite the fact that many political platforms of RRPPs are mainly concerned with cultural issues, it is still not the only game in town.

Economic issues remain one of the cornerstones of political debate and election campaigns in Western democracies. Policy areas such as welfare, education, and labour rights continue to represent critical political divides. In this context, RRPPs increasingly cater to the needs of 'ordinary people' by highlighting an alleged malfunctioning of states' welfare systems caused by the influx of foreign populations (Fennema, 2005, pp. 10–11; Mudde, 2007, pp. 119–124). Some RRPPs have also managed to gain considerable electoral support among socio-economically disadvantaged groups and parts of the electorate who fear personal economic downturns. Given that the populist radical right is continuously attracting strata of the electorate whose primary vote decision in the past was at least in part framed in leftist economic terms, promoting pro-welfare positions constitutes a promising programmatic strategy to prevent future vote loss and to win back (economically deprived or concerned) voters from an RRP competitor. While we already know that parties respond to the success of RRPPs by taking up more authoritarian positions (see e.g. Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018; van Spanje, 2010), we argue that the same should apply to more pro-welfare positions. By expanding the foci of earlier studies concerned with RRPP success and their impact on party competition regarding welfare (Röth, Afonso, & Spies, 2018; Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016), we argue that promoting pro-welfare stances constitutes a plausible strategic response from RRPPs' competitors.

However, a pro-welfare-state response should also depend on the ideological profile of the political party in question. Left-of-centre parties are likely to own issues such as welfare and social justice. They are therefore especially threatened by RRPPs' attraction of socio-economically disadvantaged voter groups and have a direct incentive to put forward pro-welfare stances in order to challenge RRPPs' claim to defend the interests of these groups. In contrast, right-of-centre parties predominantly compete with RRPPs for culturally authoritarian voters. Hence, we argue that Conservatives and Liberals will opt for a less pronounced pro-welfare response to RRPP success than left-of-centre parties.

Based on data provided by the MARPOR group (Volkens et al., 2018), we investigate the effect of RRPP vote share on the positions of non-RRPPs on welfare-related issues. We do so by analysing 670 party manifestos in 18 Western European countries since 1985 in a time-series cross-section framework. The results show that non-RRPPs promote more leftist positions on welfare when challenged by RRPPs. This effect is not

limited to mainstream parties. We also find that this effect is primarily driven by left-of-centre parties. These findings underline that RRPPs' impact on party competition is more profound than assumed in the current discourse. While non-RRPPs have been found to modify their stances on immigration, this study reveals that political parties are also adjusting their programmatic strategies on the economic conflict dimension. The impact of RRPPs on Western European politics thus goes well beyond the realm of migration politics and this study constitutes an important step towards a more comprehensive research agenda investigating changing patterns of political competition but also the impact of RRPPs on representative democracy.

### **State of the art: The programmatic impact of radical right populist parties on their competitors**

Previous studies have repeatedly found that political parties respond to the electoral success of RRPPs. This is consistent with more general research on policy adjustments by parties (e.g. Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009). First and foremost, mainstream parties from the right *and* left adjust their positions on issues related to cultural protectionism by shifting toward the rightist pole of this conflict dimension. The rationale behind this accommodative strategy (Meguid, 2008) is to send a signal to the public that mainstream parties are (now) seriously committed to this issue. In the process, mainstream parties expect not only to prevent future vote loss but also to regain votes previously lost to challengers from the far right. This strategy is assumed to work due to mainstream parties' higher chances of government participation and the actual implementation of more rigorous migration and integration policies. Although some studies cast doubt on this contagious effect of the radical right (see Mudde, 2013 for an overview), the majority of comparative large-n studies find empirical support for this relationship (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018; Han, 2015; van Spanje, 2010).

All these studies do not investigate whether RRPPs have contagious effects beyond their core issues, i.e. immigration and integration. This lack of research is surprising since at least two dimensions of conflict structure political competition in Western Europe (Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2012): a traditional economic left-right dimension and a cultural 'New Politics' or GAL-TAN dimension (Hooghe, Marks, & Wilson, 2002).<sup>2</sup> Although the latter (cultural) issues have gained importance since the late 1970s (Inglehart, 1977), economic issues remain crucial in Western European societies. Policy areas such as welfare, education, and labour rights continue to represent critical political divides that determine voters' choices and structure the parties' programmatic strategies. As a consequence, the success of RRPPs can be described not only in terms of cultural divides but also (at least in part) in socio-economic terms. While it is true that anti-immigrant attitudes unite voters of RRPPs across Western Europe (van der Brug & Fennema, 2003), we also see a divide between losers and winners of globalisation when it comes to voting for the radical right (Kriesi et al., 2012). Thus, the programmatic responses of non-RRPPs should thus not be limited to the cultural issue domain.

Only few studies investigated effects that go beyond RRPPs' cultural core issues. For example, Meijers (2017) found a contagious effect of radical right populist parties on the positions of mainstream parties regarding European integration, which, however, cannot be completely separated from the cultural dimension of political competition

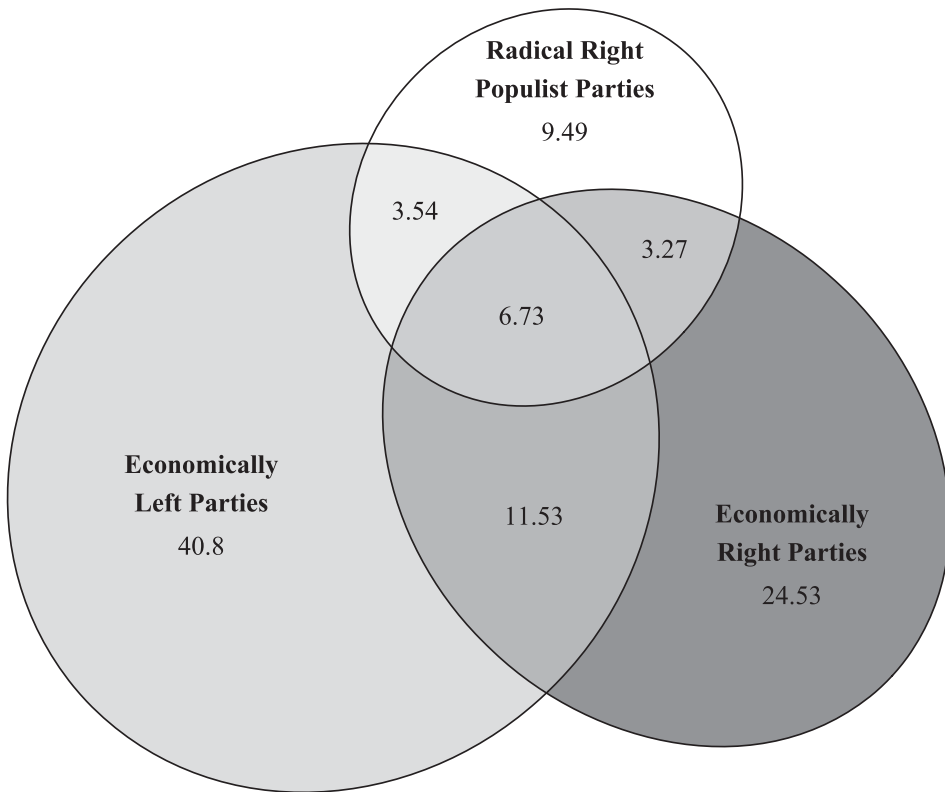
when looking at the radical right (e.g. Mudde, 2007: chapter 7). With regard to the economic dimension, Röth et al. (2018) develop a mixed-method design and apply it to 17 Western European countries. They show that governments that include an RRPP tend to be less supportive of market deregulation than right-wing governments without RRPP participation. At the same time, they back away from advocating welfare-state retrenchment – against the policy preferences of their primarily market-liberal coalition partners. While our paper does not focus on the policy consequences of RRPP's electoral success, but on the consequences for spatial competition, Röth et al.'s study is nevertheless of great importance for our argument. By offering a defence of the welfare state, RRPPs clearly put some emphasis on the economic dimension, thereby competing with other parties for voters and policies (e.g. welfare state conservation vs. welfare state retrenchment).

Even more closely related to our study, Schumacher and van Kersbergen (2016) asked whether and how mainstream parties in eight West European countries respond programmatically to successful RRPPs that hold welfare-chauvinist positions. They find that increasingly welfare-chauvinist positions of RRPPs are associated with mainstream parties becoming less supportive of multiculturalism and that only mainstream parties on the right adjust their position on the welfare state to a more pro-welfare stance. Although their study is insightful and sheds first (empirical) light on the impact of RRPPs on the economic conflict dimension, it leaves room for improvement. For example, the authors looked for positional changes of mainstream parties as a result of RRPPs' policy offers regarding welfare-chauvinism. As we argue below, this implies at least two unnecessary restrictions: First, RRPPs do not only compete with mainstream parties, especially when it comes to the economic dimension. Second, and more importantly, building on existing research on RRPP voter profiles and electoral competition, we present several arguments in support of examining whether RRPPs influence the welfare positions of established parties even if pro-welfare stances are not central to the programmatic appeals of RRPPs. The latter not only broadens the perspective, but also allows us to stick to more established and convincing measures of party positions.<sup>3</sup>

All in all, we contribute to the broader literature by explicitly focusing on the economic dimension and going beyond the limits of policy implementation, but focusing on party competition, for which RRPPs play a much greater role than in the rare cases where they have been part of government. In addition, we argue that the impact of RRPPs is not limited to reactions of mainstream parties, but also affects smaller challenger parties. As far as these reactions are concerned, our approach is not limited to programmatic adjustments in the area of welfare chauvinism, but we look at welfare policy positions in general. Finally, we claim that these effects are not based on the actual policy positions of RRPPs on economic issues – i.e. the support for pro-welfare measures – but on the composition of their voters. We thus provide a more general framework – both, in terms of the theoretical argument and empirical analysis.

### **Radical right populist party success and the welfare issue**

In many Western democracies, RRPPs have been electorally successful for quite some time – including some late-comers such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD – Alternative for Germany) or recent large-scale vote increases of parties like the Italian Lega Nord



**Figure 1.** Overlapping voter pools between radical right, economic left-of-centre and economic right-of-centre parties.

Note: The figure shows European averages based on national percentages (weighted data).

(Northern League) or the Swedish Democrats. These vote gains are to the detriment of leftist and rightist rival parties. While there are differences between countries and contexts, political parties of very different origins come under pressure. Satisfying current voters and, ideally, winning (back) voters from other parties is of utmost importance for parties, whether they primarily seek office or policy. While not guaranteeing success, adjusting policy positions constitutes one possible strategy to maximise votes.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1 shows a substantial overlap in the competition for votes between RRPPs, economic left-of-centre, and economic right-of-centre parties in Western Europe. Based on data provided by the 2014 European Election Study (Schmitt, Hobolt, Popa, & Teperoglou, 2016), we see the shares of voters considering voting for these three party families. Not surprisingly, the overlap of available voters (Kroh, van der Brug, & van der Eijk, 2007; Wagner, 2017) is greatest between left-of-centre and right-of-centre parties. We also see a significant overlap in the electoral availability between non-RRPPs and RRPPs.<sup>5</sup> About 10.2% of respondents are potential supporters of a left-wing party as well as an RRPP, while the value for an overlap of a non-RRPP right-wing party with an RRPP is slightly lower. All three party groups have a common pool of available voters of about 6.7%. While this is primarily an illustration, it does speak in favour of electoral competition with RRPPs of both economically left-wing as well as right-wing parties,



encouraging both latter groups of parties to adjust their policy positions to attract voters from these overlapping voter pools.

The success of RRPPs depends to a large extent on their attractiveness for the so-called 'losers of globalisation.' These citizens feel or are threatened by international economic competition (Rooduijn 2015), which leads, for example, to anti-immigration stances. However, these voters should also be inclined to support more generous welfare-state policies as this group either faces or is at risk of a downward trend in its socio-economic status due to globalisation. The importance of economic issues for these voters can be directly deduced from the programmatic positions of RRPPs. From the viewpoint of RRPPs, the functioning of Western European social security and welfare systems is threatened by the alleged excessive influx of foreign populations (Rydgren, 2008). The populist far right thus presents measures against immigration as a legitimate defence of the social gains and welfare of the indigenous population (Betz & Johnson, 2004). As Schumacher and van Kersbergen (2016) point out, anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes are sometimes associated with economically leftist positions, resulting in welfare chauvinism.

However, by placing more emphasis on the populist character of these parties, we argue that such a connection is not necessary for theoritising the relevance of welfare positions to RRPPs. While several RRPPs have campaigned on right-wing economic demands in the past – especially regarding tax policies – many of them have moderated their positions since the 1980s (e.g. Rydgren 2013, p. 4). In recent decades Western European countries have seen a relatively uniform development towards welfare-state retrenchment – promoted by established rightist and leftist parties. The adaptation of Kitschelt's (1995, p. 21) argument that RRPPs were originally against the welfare state, as this represented an anti-establishment position in times of retrenchment, criticising welfare-state retrenchment has nowadays the potential of becoming a new populist, anti-establishment position (see also Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016). Thus, RRPPs can directly link the opposition to welfare-state retrenchment to their populist character.

Switching from the supply to the demand side, most of the successful radical right parties have seen a proletarianisation of their electorate (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Rydgren, 2008), leading to a 'new pattern of class-voting in Western Europe' (Arzheimer, 2013, p. 79). RRPPs have attracted large numbers of voters from the lower and working classes. Although these voters may be driven by cultural factors related to globalisation (Bornschiefer & Kriesi, 2013), they still support generous welfare states. A second group of RRPP supporters can be described as being more middle class and therefore driven less by low status than by fear of losing status. However, since welfare state institutions are also designed to moderate negative life trajectories, for example after job loss, we would also expect positive attitudes among the middle class towards the welfare state. These arguments can be underlined once again with comparative data from the 2014 European Election Study (Schmitt et al., 2016).<sup>6</sup> On average, 50% of RRPP supporters are in favour of redistribution from the rich to the poor. Although there are differences between countries (from 35% in Denmark to 72% in Greece), a look at this typical indicator of pro welfare-state attitudes clearly underlines that a significant proportion of RRPP supporters have left-wing attitudes when it comes to the economic conflict dimension. This connects very well to Röth et al. (2018, p. 345) who state that 'the working-class constituency of PRPPs makes it difficult for these parties to openly support welfare retrenchment.'



Summarising these points, it seems reasonable for competing parties to react to the success of RRPPs not only by adapting cultural or EU issue positions but also by shifting their economic positions to the left, more precisely their stances towards the welfare state. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Parties react to the success of RRPPs by shifting their policy positions on welfare-state issues to the left.

It may, however, be that not all non-RRPPs respond to the success of RRPPs by shifting their policy positions to the same extent. Given the uniform trends toward welfare state retrenchment in Western Europe since the 1990s, it seems plausible that economically left parties have more to gain by shifting their stance towards pro-welfare state positions than parties on the right. Such a refinement of our first hypothesis is supported by the issue-ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996), party competence ascription (Budge & Farlie, 1983) as well as party-specific association with certain macro-economic policy goals (Hibbs, 1977). In addition to ideological factors, strategic decisions by parties are also influenced by how they are perceived by citizens; a positive and coherent association should help them win votes. Following this line of thought, there are at least three aspects that suggest that economically left parties should change their position more than economically right parties: Firstly, long-term programmatic commitment to welfare-related issues characterises the majority of left-of-centre parties. Voters consider them not only as serious actors in these policy areas, but also as the most competent problem-solvers for social justice issues (Seeberg, 2017). On this basis, left parties have a strategic advantage in competing for votes with RRPPs on the socio-economic dimension. Voters are likely to choose left parties over RRPPs based on their ownership advantage. Moreover, neoliberal policies have disillusioned especially supporters of left-of-centre parties, as these parties – driven by office-seeking goals – appealed to centrist voters at the expense of the working class (Karreth, Polk, & Allen, 2013). Returning to more pro-welfare stances could be a fruitful strategy for these parties to win back voters by regaining ideological coherence.

Secondly, defusing the salience of dividing issues such as immigration during election campaigns could possibly play to the electoral advantage of left-of-centre parties (Bale, Green-Pedersen, Krouwel, Luther, & Sitter, 2010). Position-shifting on the welfare issue could not only reduce the relevance of the core issues of RRPPs but also increase the importance of the welfare issue in public and party-internal debates. With such a renewed focus on their core issues, left-of-centre parties can thus stick to their guns.

Finally, economically left parties and RRPPs compete for overlapping voter segments (see also Figure 1). In connection with their above-mentioned attractiveness to so-called ‘losers of globalisation,’ RRPPs are increasingly gaining support from left-authoritarian voters, i.e. voters who favour redistributive policies in the economic realm, but also hold conservative stances when it comes to cultural issues (Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2006). Although these voters tend to be affiliated with the economic left in times when cultural issues are less relevant, they are likely to vote for RRPPs once these do become more crucial (Lefkofridi, Wagner, & Willmann, 2014). Promoting pro-welfare stances and increasing their relevance in the public debate improves the chances of economically left parties to win back these left-authoritarian voters.

On the basis of these considerations, we can formulate a second hypothesis:

H2: Parties on the left react to the success of RRPPs by shifting their policy positions on welfare state issues more to the left than parties on the right.

Building on previous research and these theoretical considerations, our study makes several significant contributions by testing these hypotheses with longitudinal data for a large number of Western European democracies. First, we test whether the success of RRPPs changes the competitive behaviour of non-RRPPs beyond the area of immigration policies. Such an approach also implies a more explicit consideration of the (at least) two-dimensional nature of political competition. Second, previous studies have limited their considerations to the responses of mainstream parties, thus excluding other relevant parties. Our theoretical argument applies to all parties in a party system; we test whether Western European party systems as such are affected by the surge of RRPPs. Third, this analysis also looks at the broader literature concerned with the impact of niche parties in general. It shows that the parties' responses to the rise of challenger parties are not unidimensional, but that the parties – depending on the configuration of the political space, previous programmatic commitment, and the programmatic appeals of the challenger party – choose different strategies to deal with processes of voter dealignment.

## Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we need longitudinal, cross-national measures of parties' stances on welfare-related issues. We use data from the MARPOR group (Volkens et al., 2018), which includes almost all democratic elections in Western Europe since the Second World War. This dataset provides party positions based on the coding of manifestos published by the parties in the run-up to national parliamentary elections.<sup>7</sup> Each quasi-sentence of these manifestos was assigned to one of 56 predefined categories. Building on this, the proportion of quasi-sentences relating to one of these categories was determined. To transform these frequency scores into positional values, we rely on logit-transformed scales as proposed by Lowe, Benoit, Mikhaylov, and Laver (2011).

To construct the welfare scale, we use policy categories that relate directly to government services. More specifically, we use the items '*per504: Welfare State Expansion*' and '*per506: Education Expansion*' as leftist categories. The items '*per505: Welfare State Limitation*' and '*per507: Education Limitation*' represent rightist categories.<sup>8</sup>

Our main explanatory variable is the vote share a RRPP has gained prior to the drafting of the manifesto in question. To identify RRPPs, we rely on party selections from previous studies (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018; Han, 2015; van Spanje, 2010). This selection is largely similar to those parties that Mudde (2007) classified as populist or nativist. To identify RRPPs' electoral support in national elections, we use data provided by the research unit 'Democracy and Democratization' at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. We have replaced the missing data after consulting national election commissions. We consider only the vote share of the strongest RRPP per election (see Table A1 in the appendix).

We use information from the MARPOR project to identify economically left-of-centre and right-of-centre parties. More precisely, we use the left-right scores of the parties, which represent left-right placements in a primarily socio-economic definition. In a first step, we calculate country-specific averages of this variable using weighted (by vote

share) party values.<sup>9</sup> In a second step, we calculate the average left-right scores for each party. Finally, the party-specific means are compared with the country-specific means. As smaller values on the left-right scale refer to more leftist positions, parties with mean values below the country average are coded as left-of-centre parties. Correspondingly, values above the country average result in a ‘right-of-centre’ classification.

We add several control variables to reduce the risk of spurious correlations. We control for the positions of non-RRPPs on cultural protectionism. To this end, we again rely on the data provided by the MARPOR group and the rescaling procedure described above. Using the items ‘*per607: Multiculturalism Positive*’ and ‘*per608: Multiculturalism Negative*’, the positions of non-RRPPs are constructed. Furthermore, previous research has shown that party size and government status influence parties’ responses to competition (Carmines & Stimson, 1986; Riker, 1993; van de Wardt, 2015).

In addition, we control for macroeconomic indicators that could influence the strategic positioning of parties in terms of welfare. In this context, we control for the unemployment rate (Teorell et al., 2018), the immigration rate,<sup>10</sup> GDP per capita (World Bank, 2016), and the respective country’s GINI-score (Solt, 2016). For all these variables, we use the value one year before the election, since party manifestos are usually written before or at the beginning of election campaigns. Ultimately, shifts in public opinion are likely to drive parties’ strategic decisions and thus constitute a potential disruptive factor when observing a relationship between RRPP success and the positional responses of other parties. Unfortunately, public opinion data either cover only a small part of the time period under study or lacks reliable items for measuring public attitudes to the welfare state. For this reason, we add the ideological centre of gravity (Gross & Sigelman, 1984) to the regression equation to control for broader public opinion trends regarding socio-economic positions.

In total, our analysis covers elections in 18 Western European countries since 1985.<sup>11</sup> After adding all independent variables to the model, our dataset comprises 183 non-RRPPs in 128 elections. The combinations of parties and elections result in 670 cases. We include all non-RRPPs in Western Europe, with the exception of special-issue and small regionalist parties, which are likely to respond differently to nation-wide challenges. It is important to note that not all elections or even countries have a competing RRPP. However, elections or countries that do not have competing RRPPs are not excluded from the analyses as they provide relevant information on policy changes of non-RRPPs based on our control variables and general trends during our research period.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics ( $N = 670$ ).

Variable	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Welfare position	-3.766	1.811	-7.933	1.735
RRPP vote share	5.775	6.921	0.000	28.377
Cultural protectionism	-0.839	1.678	-4.812	4.291
Party size	15.590	12.612	0.000	52.512
Government	0.399		0	1
Unemployment rate	7.495	4.275	0.800	24.440
Immigration rate (log)	1.599	0.954	-1.828	3.612
GDP per capita (log)	10.302	0.550	8.453	11.647
GINI	27.393	3.872	20.800	35.200
Centre of gravity	-0.214	0.400	-1.823	0.882
Right-of-centre party	0.422		0	1

By definition, the variable measuring RRPP vote share is set to 0 for all these elections and countries. Table 1 provides the corresponding summary statistics for all variables.

We specify OLS regression models to evaluate whether RRPPs' vote shares impact the positions of other parties on welfare issues. Although party manifestos are not written from scratch but are based on positions promoted in the past, neither the Breusch–Godfrey test statistics nor the Durbin–Watson test statistics indicate that serial correlation is a problem.<sup>12</sup> We add party-fixed effects to deal with party-specific heterogeneity. Moreover, we use election-clustered standard errors to avoid problems arising from possible correlations of error terms across observations, i.e. election-specific factors that could influence the positions of all parties competing in an election (Rogers, 1983; Williams, 2000). Despite the panel structure of the data, the use of panel-corrected standard errors (Beck & Katz, 1995) is inappropriate because the data are highly unbalanced and the number of parties exceeds the number of time units (election periods).<sup>13</sup>

### Findings: The impact of radical right populist party success on the welfare stances of rival parties

Are parties responding to the success of RRPPs by shifting their socio-economic positions to more pro-welfare state stances? If so, is this effect more pronounced among the left-of-centre parties? In Table 2, Model 1 shows the relationship between the positions of non-RRPPs and RRPP vote share while only controlling for party characteristics. In line with Hypothesis 1, RRPP vote share has a negative effect on the dependent variable, implying that the more successful RRPPs have been at the ballot box, the more parties promote

**Table 2.** The impact of RRPPs' vote shares on the positions of non-RRPPs on welfare.

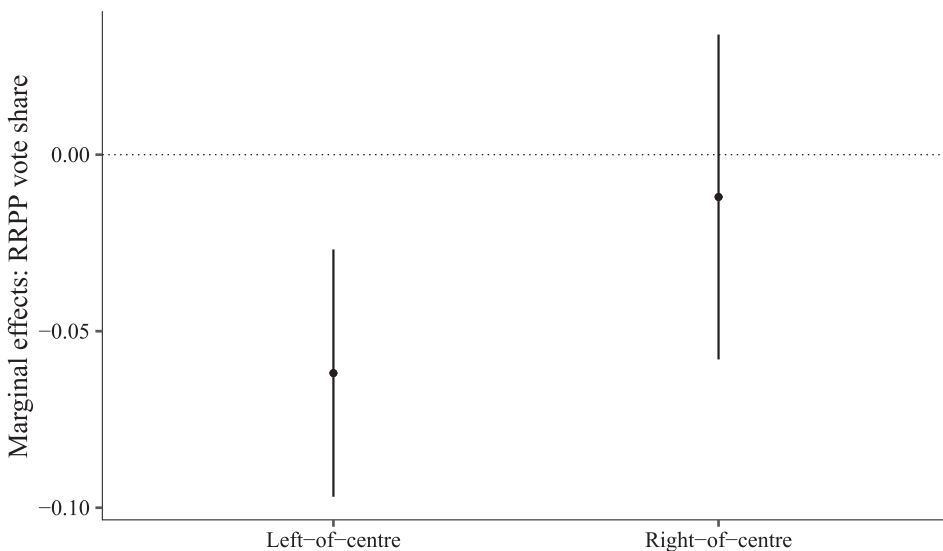
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
RRPP vote share	−0.047** (0.021)	−0.043** (0.020)	−0.062*** (0.020)
Cultural protectionism	0.120** (0.050)	0.118** (0.047)	0.112** (0.046)
Party size	−0.034** (0.016)	−0.032** (0.015)	−0.030** (0.015)
Government	0.380*** (0.132)	0.356** (0.145)	0.345** (0.145)
Unemployment rate		0.074** (0.031)	0.073** (0.032)
Immigration rate		−0.010 (0.191)	−0.007 (0.192)
GDP per capita		−0.068 (0.283)	−0.073 (0.285)
GINI		−0.038 (0.074)	−0.036 (0.075)
Centre of gravity		1.017*** (0.241)	1.014*** (0.242)
RRPP vote * Right-of-centre			0.050** (0.025)
Constant	−2.949*** (0.620)	−1.631 (2.792)	−1.594 (2.798)
Party fixed effects	√	√	√
Election SE clustering	√	√	√
N	670	670	670
Adj. R-squared	0.448	0.509	0.511

\*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .1$

supportive stances on welfare. This effect persists across all models shown in Table 2. The coefficient of cultural protectionism indicates a positive effect on the dependent variable. Hence, parties show a more restrictive programmatic profile on immigration if they also promote less supportive attitudes towards welfare. However, the effect size is rather small. A party's vote share has a negative impact – political parties promote more leftist positions on welfare the larger they are. Government participation has also a significant impact – political parties take more rightist positions on welfare if they take part in government. Political parties, once in office and confronted with the constraints of budgetary questions, thus promote less favorable welfare stances.

Model 2 adds controls related to macroeconomic trends, immigration figures, and public opinion. The unemployment rate shows a significant effect on the dependent variable. The effect is positive, suggesting that parties are less supportive of welfare as the national unemployment rate rises. Increasing unemployment rates may indicate excessive demand for welfare services in the near future, which cannot be met by many of the increasingly globalised national economies in our sample. Interestingly, we find no significant impact of GDP per capita or the GINI coefficient on the welfare-state positions of parties. Policy shifts also do not seem to have anything to do with changes of the immigration rate. Moreover, parties' policy positions are influenced by changes in the ideological centre of gravity of the respective party system. Here, a one-unit change is associated with a similar change in the position of a single party. Concerning our main variable of interest, the effect of RRPP vote share on welfare positions of non-RRPPs remains negative and significant even if we control for this variety of possible disruptive factors. Model 2 thus provides strong empirical support for Hypothesis 1.

Finally, Model 3 tests whether left-of-centre parties are more inclined to respond to the success of RRPPs by promoting pro-welfare positions (Hypothesis 2). For this purpose, we have interacted the RRPP vote share with a binary indicator that distinguishes between



**Figure 2.** Marginal effects plot.

Note: The error bars indicate 90% confidence intervals.

economically left-of-centre and right-of-centre parties.<sup>14</sup> The results confirm our theoretical expectations. The coefficient of the interaction term is positive and statistically significant at the 5% level, indicating that leftist and rightist parties indeed differ in their reactions to the electoral success of RRPPs. Figure 2 shows the corresponding marginal effects plot to facilitate interpretation. As expected, the effect for left-of-centre parties is, negative and the whiskers show that this effect is statistically significant. In comparison, the estimate for right-of-centre parties is also negative but much smaller and the whiskers include the zero line. These results thus provide empirical support for Hypothesis 2: Only economic left-of-centre parties respond to increasing public support for RRPPs by adjusting their positions in favour of pro-welfare stances. While all non-RRPPs tend to shift their welfare-state positions to the left, taking into account all other factors, there seems to be more variance when it comes to parties on the right, while parties on the left react more uniformly to the loss of parts of their core constituencies. Therefore, back to our first hypothesis, the general effect we find is driven primarily by left-of-centre parties.

To illustrate the significant differences between parties on the left and right, consider the following example. A right-of-centre party tends to shift – *ceteris paribus* – by .12 points towards the pro-welfare pole if a radical right party increases its vote share by 10% points. In comparison to this, a left-of-centre party moves .62 points toward the left in the same scenario. The reaction of centre-left-parties is thus five times larger than the response of right-of-centre parties. Such a shift is equal to one third of the standard deviation of the dependent variable and equals half the distance between the British Labour Party and the Conservative Party in the 2015 general election in the United Kingdom. Based on this, we can conclude that the effect of RRPPs on welfare-state policy shifts is quite substantial – especially consistent with our second hypothesis.

Several robustness checks support the validity of our findings.<sup>15</sup> For example, jackknife analyses show that neither a single country nor a specific party family drives the results. However, we find that the interaction term is no longer significant if the conservative/Christian democratic or the social democratic party family is excluded from the analysis (see Figure A4 in the appendix). Although this does not affect the substantial interpretation of our results, it suggests that the difference between left-of-centre and right-of-centre parties is to some extent driven by these two party families.

## Conclusions

The statement that the electoral successes of RRPPs fundamentally change or even threaten Western European democracies is probably an exaggeration. However, they do affect various elements of representative democracy, including political competition and its spatial logic. RRPPs do this not only directly in the rare cases where they have been or are in government. They also have an indirect effect by influencing the programmatic strategies of non-RRPPs. This effect has been shown for mainstream parties and especially for the core issues of RRPPs, which belong to the increasingly important socio-cultural conflict dimension. However, political competition takes place in a two-dimensional space in which the second dimension refers to the traditional left-right socio-economic conflict. Consequently, the reactions of non-RRPPs to the rise of RRPPs with the aim of preventing further vote loss and re-attracting voters do not have to be limited to the socio-cultural dimension. Since RRPPs cater to the (self-perceived) 'losers of

globalization,' which includes an economic connotation, we should not only expect non-RRPPs to adjust positions on the classical left-right dimension, but also to try to attract the lower strata of society through the promotion of more expansive welfare. This effect, we argued, should be stronger for economically left-of-centre parties.

Based on time-series analyses of a wide range of parties and countries in Western Europe from 1985 to the present, our findings indeed show that the electoral success of RRPPs leads all other parties in the party system to take more pro-welfare positions. However, there is a substantial difference between left- and right-of-centre parties, which corresponds to our second hypothesis. Economically left-of-centre parties shift more strongly to pro-welfare positions when confronted with successful RRPPs than right-of-centre parties. We attribute this difference primarily to differences in issue ownership and to characteristics of core constituents, both of which define plausible and potentially successful programmatic responses to RRPPs. These effects are robust even if we control for a set of other factors or apply alternative model specifications. Hence, the empirical analysis confirms both of our hypotheses. In contrast to the literature review of Muis and Immerzeel (2017, p. 918f.), which found that RRPPs influence other parties only in terms of their core socio-cultural issues, we present strong evidence that competing parties also react by adjusting their political positions beyond migration politics.

It is possible that apart from the distinction between economic left-of-centre and right-of-centre parties, other differences between parties play an equally important role when explaining parties' responses to the success of the radical right. So far, research has highlighted that strategic responses to challenger success vary between challenger, government and opposition parties or between those parties losing or winning votes (e.g. Abou-Chadi, 2016; van de Wardt, 2015). We have reviewed the data for such alternative interaction effects, but there appears to be no significant conditional relationship between these variables and RRPP success.<sup>16</sup> However, there is clearly room for future, more fine-grained studies that build on our approach and findings.

What are the implications of these findings? Obviously, research on RRPPs is highly *en vogue*, resulting in a massive increase in publications. However, as we show in this study, it makes sense to go beyond the traditional research paths defined by the core features of the object of analyses, namely RRPPs' issue emphasis on nativist policy positions. This can be achieved, for example, by linking more general theories and research on elections, parties and voters with RRPP-specific research questions. We show that the impact of RRPPs on political competition is underestimated when research focuses only on the socio-cultural issue dimension. In fact, non-RRPPs also react on the socio-economic dimension of political competition. Therefore, future research should apply a two-dimensional rather than a one-dimensional logic to analysing the impact of RRPPs. Moreover, we see that the influence of RRPPs goes beyond the group of (centrist) mainstream parties. RRPPs are contagious for the whole party system and therefore even drive policy shifts of smaller and non-centrist parties. It remains to be seen whether these pro-welfare shifts will indeed help (especially leftist) parties to win back votes lost to RRPPs.

We have shown that not only research on parties' strategic responses to the success of RRPPs, but also on the consequences of these strategies needs to develop more complex theoretical arguments. This would allow us to point to more indirect effects of RRPPs – not only on political competition and party systems, but also on more general characteristics of representative democracies. Although, pro-welfare shifts of party



systems may be a positive trend in the face of increasing socio-economic inequalities and their dysfunctional consequences for democracies (Merkel, 2018), it may not be a price worth paying if it depends on the rise of the radical right and its negative effects on liberal democracy and pluralist societies.

## Notes

1. We apply a broad definition of RRPPs covering both right-wing populist and nativist parties. Therefore, our set of parties is very similar to the one identified by Mudde (2007) or other studies on policy shifts due to the electoral success of RRPPs. A complete list of parties defined as RRPPs can be found in the appendix (Table A1).
2. The complex issue of the EU is linked to both the economic and the cultural-conflict dimensions (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2008) and – with regard to Western Europe – the respective strengths of these links clearly depend on factors such as actual membership of a country or the introduction of the common currency. This is also reflected in the overall salience of EU issues for different RRPPs and how they are framed by them. We have therefore chosen to apply a two-dimensional definition of political competition in this paper.
3. While we agree that measuring welfare-chauvinism on the basis of CMP codes is quite difficult, it is not convincing to simply multiply positions on welfare state issues by positions on multiculturalism. This approach does not allow us to verify whether statements on the two issues in the manifestos are actually linked. Moreover, the study does not provide much information on the authors' estimation approach. It seems, however, that the models do not control for the peculiar cross-sectional-time-series data structure beyond adding a lagged dependent variable. Therefore, standard errors can be strongly biased as there is no control for existing clusters (by party over time, of parties in elections, of parties in countries, etc.). We present a more transparent and state-of-the-art approach as an additional contribution to the literature.
4. In fact, this study does not evaluate the (potential) success of the strategic decisions of non-RRPPs. However, we develop arguments as to why specific responses to the socio-economic dimension are plausible strategies from the perspective of political parties to win back votes from RRPPs and put them to an empirical test.
5. Results are based on averages of all Western democracies with at least one RRPP. Further information on our approach can be found in the appendix.
6. A detailed description of our approach can be found in the appendix.
7. It should be noted that the MARPOR group applies specific rules on whether a party competing in an election is included in the dataset, how to deal with electoral alliances and other specific features of countries or elections (Volkens et al., 2018). As a result, the set of parties available for inclusion is limited by the MARPOR dataset at hand. However, since the inclusion criteria of the MARPOR team are mainly based on relevance (in terms of winning seats in an election), we are confident that our empirical analyses are not problematically biased.
8. The results of the regression analysis remain stable if we estimate the welfare positions of mainstream parties using only the items '*per405: Welfare State Expansion*' and '*per505: Welfare State Limitation*' (see Table A4 and Figure A1 in the Appendix).
9. In order to obtain averages that are also meaningful for the early elections under analysis, we use all available data from 1970 to the present for this calculation. We also re-run all analyses while assigning left and right parties using a purely economic scale. The results remain substantially identical to those presented.
10. The migration rate is calculated as the log-value of the inflow of foreign population divided by the total population. Migration data was derived from the OECD International Migration Database (OECD, 2011) and the population statistics are provided by Eurostat (2015).
11. Countries included are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden,

Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The period under research is defined by a substantive as well as a practical argument. On the one hand, before the mid-1980s only a few RRPPs started to gain significant electoral support. On the other hand, limitations on data availability (e.g. the immigration rate) also define the time period under investigation.

12. The results are robust to correcting for potential serial correlation by either adding a lagged dependent variable to the regression or applying a Prais-Winsten regression. The corresponding results can be found in the appendix.
13. The results of the empirical analysis are robust to alternative model specifications and the inclusion of additional covariates. Detailed information on these robustness tests can be found in the appendix.
14. As explained, e.g., by Wooldridge (2010, pp. 300–4), the models presented in this table do not include a constituent term for the intra-case time-constant variable ‘right-of-centre.’ However, as this deviates from common model set-ups, we also present our main model and the corresponding marginal effects plot based on party-demeaned values and a constituent term in the appendix (Table A2). This has no effect on our findings.
15. The corresponding results can be found in the appendix.
16. Indeed, the distinction between left-of-centre and right-of-centre parties seems to be one of the main factors conditioning the impact of RRPP success on the welfare positions of other parties. We have tested whether party size, government participation, or being a challenger party conditions the response of a party to increasing electoral support for RRPPs. To avoid the use of three-way interaction terms, we have estimated models for all parties as well as for left-of-centre and right-of-centre parties separately. See Table A7 in the appendix for the full regression results. It is important to note that our main findings are confirmed in all of these alternative models. Therefore, in all these cases, the marginal impact of RRPP vote share on the welfare positions of left-of-centre parties remains negative and statistically significant. Figure A5 illustrates this for the interaction between party size and RRPP vote share in the case of left-of-centre parties.

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