

West European politics is undergoing a 'worldview evolution' structured by authoritarianism

Populist radical right parties are often assumed to draw a greater share of their support from older voters. Drawing on a new book, Erik R. Tillman explains that this assumption may be incorrect. He argues that West European politics is undergoing a 'worldview evolution' in which orientations toward the structure of society increasingly shape party support. In this new context, younger voters who score highly on measures of authoritarianism appear more likely to back the populist radical right than older voters with the same attitudes.

The first two decades of the 21st century have seen changing patterns of party support, with growing support for populist radical right parties attracting the most attention. In many West European parliaments, these parties are now among the three largest. These developments have generated extensive scholarly interest and public commentary seeking to explain why populist radical right parties are growing in popularity and who votes for them.

In a recently published book, I argue that West European politics is undergoing a worldview evolution structured around authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is a [predisposition towards social conformity](#) and security at the expense of individual autonomy and diversity. High authoritarians (i.e., those scoring high in authoritarianism) find the values and demographic changes of recent decades a threat to social cohesion. These developments include increased immigration, multiculturalism, changing values, and European integration. By contrast, low authoritarians are more likely to welcome these social and political changes as enhancing individual autonomy. This worldview evolution is leading to shifts in party support as well as [attitudes towards the European Union](#).

I describe these shifts in party support as a [worldview evolution](#) because they reflect dispositional orientations about the structure of society rather than interests or group affiliations. This worldview evolution is occurring as the influence of political cleavages such as social class or religion has weakened. At the same time, social and cultural changes such as the liberalisation of social values, increased immigration, multiculturalism, and the rise of the 'knowledge economy' have led to a [new structure of party conflict](#) about the proper organisation of society in which older debates about the economy have been diminished. High authoritarians and low authoritarians differ the most from each other on these issues because they relate to the question of social conformity versus individual autonomy.

This worldview evolution is reflected in the shifting patterns of party support. My analyses of election study data show that high authoritarians are significantly more likely to vote for populist radical right parties, which have successfully attracted high authoritarian voters by criticising these developments as a threat to national community. Meanwhile, low authoritarians have become more likely to vote for green and left-liberal parties that reflect their desire for autonomy and diversity. In addition, high authoritarians have become significantly more opposed to European integration since the 1990s as elite conflict has focused more on the threats posed to national community and sovereignty. The result is that party support and attitudes towards European integration increasingly correlate with authoritarianism.

This discussion raises an important question about the generational patterns of populist radical right party support. One [argument](#) is that older, high authoritarian voters have been moving towards these parties because they are most threatened by the demographic and value changes of recent decades, which contrast with their memories of the society of their youth. However, there is good reason to expect that the relationship between authoritarianism and populist radical right party support will be strongest among younger voters.

Voting is habitual, and party attachments tend to grow stronger as the habit of supporting a particular party is reinforced. In addition, older voters entered politics during a time when political cleavages such as class and religion were much stronger. By contrast, younger voters have been socialised in a context in which those group affiliations have less connection with party attachments. Instead, they were socialised into politics during times of increasing elite conflict over the demographic and value changes at the heart of the worldview evolution.

The result is that older voters should be more likely to have a durable attachment to an established party from which they are less likely to deviate. By contrast, younger voters are less likely to have formed such a party attachment, increasing the likelihood that they will vote for newer parties such as those in the radical right family. As a result, populist radical right parties' appeal towards high authoritarians' dispositional needs for social conformity should be more effective among younger voters – who lack prior party attachments – than older voters.

A statistical analysis of survey data from the 2017 European Values Study and several national election studies is consistent with this argument. In all but two cases, there is a positive relationship between authoritarianism and support for populist radical right parties among younger voters, but this relationship is not statistically significant for older age groups. Among older cohorts, high authoritarians are no more likely to vote for these parties than low authoritarians. Among younger voters, high authoritarians are significantly more likely to vote for populist radical right parties.

What do these findings mean? This evidence should raise questions about the claim that growing support for populist radical right parties is being driven by a backlash among older voters. Instead, younger high authoritarian voters are more likely to support radical right parties, which follows from the argument that West European politics is undergoing a worldview evolution in which orientations towards the structure of society increasingly shape party support. Greater support for populist radical right parties reflects a preference for the protection of social conformity among younger voters who have grown up during a time of increased elite conflict over the structure of a changing society.

These findings also speak to the longer-term future of party support in Western Europe. For opponents of the radical right, the claim that populist radical right party support is concentrated among older voters might raise hope that generational replacement will lead to their electoral decline in the coming years. Instead, the results of my analyses suggest that those younger high authoritarians who support populist radical right parties may form stronger party attachments as they age, generating a durable base of party support.

But it is also important to emphasise that these results do not indicate that populist radical right parties will necessarily continue to gain electoral strength. Because these parties appeal most effectively to high authoritarians – who are a substantial minority in West European societies – their ability to command electoral majorities or pluralities is limited. It is also important to understand that high authoritarians worry more about the potential disintegration of society, and this fear motivates populist radical right party support along with opposition to European integration.

Party elites who wish to minimise the electoral and policy influence of the radical right could thus consider how to address the fears of social disintegration that have contributed to the ongoing worldview evolution while still working to maintain inclusive and open societies.

For more information, please see the author's accompanying book, [Authoritarianism and the Evolution of West European Electoral Politics](#) (Oxford University Press, 2021)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Randy Tarampi](#) on [Unsplash](#)
