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on the European elections 2019**

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Green wave or populist surge?

In the run up to the 2019 EP elections two party families received special attention from commentators and journalists. On the one hand they have focused on the greens, arguing that a green wave was about to hit Europe. On the other hand, they have discussed the growing support for populist radical right parties, claiming that a populist surge was materializing. These competing narratives raise an important question: Are the successes of green and populist radical right parties by any means related?

In the political science literature, the emergence of green and populist radical right parties has often been discussed in tandem. Scholars have argued that the success of these two party families can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The Italian political scientist Piero Ignazi, for example, claims that populist radical right parties emerged in the 1980s in reaction to the rise of green parties in the 1970s, with both kinds of parties benefitting from the fact that non-materialist issues became more important in post-industrial societies. On these issues, some voters approve of cosmopolitan and libertarian policies, whereas other voters support authoritarian and nationalist policies. Green and populist radical right parties are the primary representatives of these two groups of voters, taking opposite stances on non-material issues. Green parties favour sustainable development, lifestyle diversity, humane migration policies and bottom up democracy, while populist radical right parties campaign for a sharp reduction in the influx of immigrants and their mandatory integration, law and order policies, and cultural and lifestyle homogeneity. On questions pertaining to the future of the European integration project the two party families tend to have polar opposite ideas.

If the rise of the populist radical right and greens were indeed related, we would expect that in the 2019 EP elections these two party families display growth patterns that are roughly similar. At a first glance the results of the 2019 elections for the EP seem to support that expectation (see table 1). Green and populist radical right parties have on average gained similar levels of electoral support in these elections, with a 14.1 per cent vote share for green parties and a 14.3 per cent vote share for populist radical right parties. Moreover, the average percentage point by which these parties have grown is also roughly similar, with 3.3 percentage point growth for green parties and 3.0 percentage point growth for populist radical right parties.

However, these averages fail to show the marked difference in the growth patterns within the two party families. For green parties the 2019 EP elections have been the most successful to date. With the exception of the green parties in Sweden (-3.9) and Austria (-0.4), they have all improved upon their vote share compared to the 2014 elections. Moreover, green parties benefit from equal levels of support across Western Europe, with their vote shares consistently ranging

between 10 and 20 per cent. The largest parties can be found in Belgium (19.9% for Ecolo), Germany (20.5% for Die Grünen) and Luxembourg (18.9% for Dei Greng), the smallest is the Netherlands (10.9% for GroenLinks) and Spain (10.1% for Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds).

The picture is far more complex on the other side of the political continuum. Populist radical right parties have grown considerably in Belgium (+12.3), Italy (+28.2), Spain (+6.2) and the United Kingdom (+30.7). Other populist radical right parties have lost a fair amount of votes compared to the 2014 elections. The group of losing parties includes UKIP (-23.6), the DF (-15.8) and the PVV (-10.1), as well as their Greek, French and Austrian compatriots. Two populist radical right parties (ANEL and the PVV) have experienced such substantial losses that they are no longer represented in the EP. Other populist radical right parties have made such large gains that they represent more than one in three voters in their respective countries (e.g. the Lega and the Brexit Party).

What is more, gains and losses of green and populist radical right parties are hardly correlated. The countries in which green parties fared particularly well are not the countries in which populist radical right parties triumphed. Point in case is Italy, where the Lega became the largest party, but the greens did not obtain any seats. Conversely, Ireland and Luxembourg green parties were successful, while no populist radical right parties are present. Thus, it appears that the 'green wave' and the 'populist surge' are at not directly related, at least not at the aggregate level. Moreover, many populist radical right parties experienced a peak in support in the previous EP elections, while the 2019 elections were the most successful to date for green parties.

Table 1. Support for green and populist radical right parties in the 2019 EP elections

Vote share compared to 2014	Vote share	Green party	Country	Populist radical right party	Vote share	Vote share compared to 2014
-0.4	14.1%	Grüne	Austria	FPO	17.2%	-2.5
+8.2/+1.7	19.9%/12.4%	Ecolo/Groen	Belgium	VB	19.1%	+12.3
+2.2	13.2%	SF	Denmark	DF	10.8%	-15.8
+6.7	16.0%	VL	Finland	PS	13.8%	+0.9
+4.5	13.5%	EELV	France	RN	23.3%	-1.6
+9.8	20.5%	DG	Germany	AfD	11.0%	+3.9
-	-	-	Greece	ANEL*	0.8%	-2.7
+6.5	11.4%	GP	Ireland	-		
-	-	-	Italy	Lega	34.3%	+28.2
+3.9	18.9%	DG	Luxemburg	-		
+3.9	10.9%	GL	Netherlands	FvD/PVV*	11.0%/3.2%	+11.0/-10.1
-	-	-	Portugal	-		
+0.1	10.1%	ICV	Spain	VOX	6.2%	+6.2
-3.9	11.5%	MP	Sweden	SD	15.3%	+5.6
+3.9	11.1%	GPNi	UK	Brexit Party/UKIP	30.7%/3.2%	+30.7/-23.6
+3.3	14.1%		<i>average</i>		14.3%	+3.0

* No longer represented after the 2019 elections for the EP and therefore not included in the averages.

Source: <https://election-results.eu/national-results-overview/>