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Still blurry?

Economic Salience, Position, and Voting for Radical Right Parties in Western Europe

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Abstract

Do radical right parties present blurry economic stances, or have they clarified their positions while moving towards the economic left? This paper questions the strategic behavior of radical right parties in western Europe. We show that although radical right parties have increased their discussion of economic issues, and expert placements of this party family on the economic dimension have become more centrist over time, the uncertainty surrounding these placements continues to be higher for the radical right than any other party family in Europe. We then move on to examine to what extent voter-party congruence on redistribution, immigration, and other issues of social lifestyle predict an individual's propensity to vote for the radical right compared to other parties. Although redistribution is the component of economic policy where the radical right seems to be centrist, our findings indicate that it remains party-voter congruence on immigration that drives support for radical right parties, while the congruence level for redistribution has an insignificant effect. The paper concludes that while radical right parties seem to have included some clearly left-leaning economic proposals, which shifted the general expert views of these parties to the economic center, their overall economic profiles remain as blurry as ever.

Introduction

Where do radical right parties stand on economic politics? At first glance, it may seem obvious that a party family with ‘right’ in its name would be located on the right of the economic left-right spectrum. In their classic text on these parties, Kitschelt and McGann (1995) suggested that the party family’s winning formula consisted of combining cultural authoritarianism with economic neo-liberalism. While this may have been true in the 1980s, today this group of parties primarily shares a culturally conservative position, particularly on questions of immigration and supranational integration (Mudde 2007), rather than consistent positions on matters of economic policy (Afonso 2015). Across western Europe, newspaper headlines such as “how the Nordic far-right has stolen the left’s ground on welfare”¹ illustrate that in some cases radical right parties may have adopted clearer left-wing economic profiles (Afonso and Rennwald 2018). Yet when it comes to these economic matters, one possibility is that radical right parties have shifted to take more centrist positions (De Lange 2007; Junger and Jupskås 2014), while other research argues that they ‘blur’ or consciously obfuscate their stances (Rovny 2013).

This article thus addresses an empirical puzzle, asking whether the radical right has shifted and clarified its economic positions in recent years, or whether it continues to present opaque economic profiles. The answer to this question has important implications for our theoretical understanding of partisan behavior and party strategizing. We find that radical right parties have indeed shifted to the economic center, and that this shift is particularly associated with increased left-leaning discourse of these parties. However, the overall economic placements of these parties by expert coders are as blurry as ever, and citizens vote for the radical right primarily when they agree with its anti-immigration stances, and not its economic proposals. This latter finding is consistent with analyses reporting that radical right party support is not best explained by voters’ views on the economy (see, e.g., van der Brug et al. 2000, Ivarsflaten 2008, Aichholzer et al. 2014). Our findings also complement research that stresses the importance of including issue salience when analyzing the representational relationship between parties and voters from the perspective of ideological congruence (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Giger and Lefkofridi 2014; Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014).

In the next section, we review the literature on radical right economic placement, while considering the theoretical expectations concerning the strategic behavior of political parties, particularly the radical right. We then describe our data, explain our methodological

¹Coman, Julian (2015 July 26) “How the Nordic far-right has stolen the left’s ground on welfare.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/26/scandinavia-far-right-stolen-left-ground-welfare>.

approach, and present our empirical evidence based on party- and voter-level data spanning western European countries². The final section serves as a conclusion.

The Radical Right: Blurry or Moving?

The radical right is well known for its extreme views on cultural issues, particularly those pertaining to immigration, and law-and-order (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Mudde 2007). Its economic positioning has, however, been contested both in the academic literature, and by more casual observers. While some evidence suggests that radical right parties are slowly but surely moving to the economic left, seeking to capture the support of the working class disenchanted with social democratic parties (De Lange 2007; Junger and Jupskås 2014; Afonso and Rennwald 2018), other analysis suggests that the radical right is strategically vague about its economic proposals, attempting to avoid economic positioning that may prove divisive (Rovny 2013).

In line with Rovny (2013: 5), we understand position blurring as presenting “vague, contradictory or ambiguous positions” on some political theme. Positional ambiguity can stem from absence of a position on a given issue; from a diversity of positions on the same issue; or from combining positions on related issues in contradictory ways – such as calling for higher spending and lower taxes.

Much of the literature suggests that not taking a clear position carries electoral costs (Shepsle 1972; Enelow and Hinich 1981; Bartels 1986; Franklin 1991; Gill 2005), and finds that “the more uncertain a voter is about candidate positions, the less likely she is to support the candidate” (Alvarez 1998: 204). These works see ambiguity as a structural liability caused by an inadequate campaign that fails to engender candidate visibility, or by lack of political experience and prominence of the political candidate. This literature thus assumes that clarity is the core strategic aim of political campaigns, and that ambiguity is not a strategy, but rather an error.

However, a variety of recent works have illustrated the potential benefits of strategic obfuscation (Somer-Topcu 2015; Bräuninger and Giger 2016; Lo, Proksch and Slapin 2016; Han 2018). The core logic behind position blurring is the deliberate misrepresentation of issue distance between the party and its potential voters, in order to build a broader support base and increase its vote share. There are two ways that this dynamic has been theorized and analyzed. First, some works assess ambiguity in one issue dimension, suggesting that parties need to please core, activist supporters who may be more extreme on certain issues, while also appealing to broader, centrist groups of voters (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012). To do this, a party may use vague positioning on the issue in order

²See the appendix for details.

to misrepresent the distance between itself and potential voters.

Second, Rovny (2012, 2013) considers position blurring in multiple dimensions. Building on the insight from the issue competition literature that a party invests in issues that are central to its identity (Budge and Fairlie 1983; Budge et al. 1987; Petrocik 1996; Green-Pedersen 2007), blurring theory expects that a party emphasizes and takes clear stances on its primary issues, while strategically blurring positions on secondary issues. A blurred political stance allows a party to adjust its political message to varied audiences. It is an anti-deterrent tactic, aimed at blunting inconvenient political issues. The emphasis on primary issues, combined with blurring of secondary issues, allows a political party to potentially misrepresent the distance between the party and its voters, thus constructing broader support around their core interests, regardless of voters' views on secondary issues. We follow this logic, expecting the radical right to strategically blur positions on issues that are secondary to them.

The radical right is deeply invested in the non-economic issue dimension. Questions of law and order, opposition to European integration, and particularly, immigration, have played a central role in the political discourses of this party family, defining its identity. These parties gain from attracting socially conservative voters, however, the economic preferences of these voters are rather eclectic (Ivarsflaten 2005). Consequently, Rovny (2013) demonstrated the clear and radical positioning of these parties on socio-cultural issues, combined with blurry – vague, muted and erratic – economic placements.

The original literature on radical right parties primarily expected them to hold extreme right stances on economic issues (Ignazi 2003; Betz 1994; Kitschelt and McGann 1995). Later, observers suggested that radical right parties may not be on the economic extreme right, but rather closer to the center (Kitschelt 2004; De Lange 2007; Junger and Jupskås 2014). Finally, recent research suggests that some radical right parties may be moving towards more explicitly left-wing economic proposals (Ivaldi 2015; Hartevelde 2016; Afonso and Rennwald 2018) or welfare chauvinistic proposals (Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016). This discussion raises two, inter-related questions: has there been an increase in the prominence of economic issues for radical right parties, including a leftward shift in economic positioning over the last decades? If so, does such a shift towards more left-leaning economic preferences coincide with positional clarification on this dimension for this group of parties?

We believe that this is only partly the case. On the one hand, radical right parties have indeed devoted more attention to economic issues. In the context of post-industrial economic development, and in the aftermath of the 'great recession,' radical right parties have attempted to provide a political home to those threatened by various social risks (Rovny and Rovny 2017, Im et al. 2019). On the other hand, radical right parties remain very conscious of the heterogenous economic interests of their (potential) voters that

include (ex-)industrial workers, lower-grade white-collar workers, as well as small business owners. What mobilizes and binds these voters is primarily their opposition to migration and the established political elites, not their economic outlooks.

Consequently, we expect that radical right parties discuss economic issues at a higher rate than in the past, employing some more explicitly left-wing economic themes. Simultaneously, they maintain their traditional economic vagueness by also proposing right-wing economic messages. In sum, their overall stance on the economy continues to be ambiguous and contradictory. In order to keep and expand their economically heterogeneous social coalition, radical right economic outlooks continue to do several things at once – they remain blurry. We thus advance the following hypotheses:

H1: The salience of economic issues has increased among radical right parties.

H2: Radical right parties have discussed more left-wing topics over time, placing them closer to the economic center.

H3: Radical right economic blurring has not decreased over time.

H4: Voting for the radical right is determined by voter-party congruence on immigration, and not on economic issues.

We anticipate that, taken as a whole, economic issues have become somewhat more important for the radical right and that the party family has shifted to the economic center over time. However, we further assert that this is not the product of clearly articulating centrist economic policies, but is likely a consequence of strategic ambiguity on the part of these parties, and an embrace of an ‘all things to all people’ style of economic politics. Finally, we expect that the choice to vote for radical right parties remains primarily driven by cultural rather than economic considerations. The next section describes the data and methods we use to test these hypotheses.

Data and Methods

To assess these hypotheses, we use three data sources. For the political parties, we use the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) to measure the positions of political parties across Europe (Bakker et al. 2015, Polk et al. 2017). This data covers a time period spanning from 1999 to 2017. We also use the Manifesto project data (Volkens et al. 2018) as a

measure salience by examining the share of quasi-sentences of a party manifesto belonging to a particular thematic category, covering a period from the mid-1980s until 2017. As concerns the voters, we use the 2014 European Election Studies (EES) to assess the responses of citizens in the Member States of the European Union to the changing profiles of radical right parties (Schmitt, Hobolt, and Popa 2015; Schmitt et al. 2015).

We start by focusing on the party level. The policy positions of political parties are latent concepts that cannot be directly measured. Because of this, scholars have developed a variety of approaches to estimating party positions based on electoral manifestos (e.g. Merz, Regel, and Lewandowski 2016), roll-call votes (e.g. Hix, Noury, and Roland 2006), or surveying experts of the party politics of a country (e.g. Benoit and Laver 2006). Each method of measurement has strengths and limitations (Steenbergen and Marks 2007, Marks et al. 2007). We attempt to leverage the strengths of two prominent approaches by first measuring the share of party manifestos focused on economic and welfare issues in order to assess the salience of economic issues for different party types. We next move on to consider the expert placements of political parties with the CHES data, and then use the expert uncertainty of party placements in the CHES data as a measure of positional blurriness (See Rovny and Polk 2017 for a recent application). In particular, we expect that less agreement between experts in the placement of radical right parties on economic policies – as measured through standard deviations – will indicate vagueness or blurry positions, while more agreement between experts suggests concrete and clear economic positions.

The association between expert uncertainty and positional blurriness of parties is an assumption used by Rovny (2013). Fortunately, the 2017 Chapel Hill Expert Survey includes direct questions about the clarity of party positions on economic and cultural issues. We use this data to examine the extent to which expert uncertainty (standard deviations of expert placements) correlate with direct expert assessment of positional clarity. Table 1 confirms the expectation that greater positional clarity is associated with lower expert uncertainty (smaller standard deviations in expert placements reflected in the negative values). Interestingly, the association is stronger on the cultural dimension, suggesting that parties with clearly defined placements on cultural issues are associated with significantly greater expert placement agreement. We suspect that this is driven by niche parties that tend to compete on non-economic issues, such as the greens and the radical right, whose respective social liberalism or conservatism is hardly questionable (Meguid 2008; Spoon 2011; Abou-Chadi 2016). Overall, the relationship between direct assessment of clarity and expert uncertainty, reported in the table, supports the expectation that placement uncertainty is an imperfect, but reasonable proxy for capturing party position blurring.³

³An alternative measure of positional vagueness, developed by Rozenas (2013), corre-

	economic SD	cultural SD
economic clarity	-0.343	0.195
cultural clarity	0.325	-0.508

Table 1: Correlations of positional clarity and expert uncertainty

Note: Clarity is measured with direct questions from CHES 2017. SDs are party-level expert standard deviations in placement.

Given that expert uncertainty measures are available for all CHES rounds, we use it rather than the direct clarity measure available only in 2017. Figure 8 in the appendix summarizes expert evaluations of party clarity across diverse party families, confirming our expectations that the radical right party family puts forward the least clear economic positions of the major party families.

We now turn to discuss our empirical results. We begin at the party-level, and then move on to examine European voters.

Analyses

Radical Right Parties on the Move?

Radical right parties generally place lower emphasis on economic issues than major left- and right-wing parties. Their economic focus, however, underwent a transition over the last three decades. Figure 1 gives support to H1, highlighting that radical right parties have increased the share of economic mentions in their manifestos from roughly 20% in the late 1980s to under 30% by 2015. However, while there is an upward trend in economic salience for the radical right, this trend is also as strong if not stronger for the major parties. These data suggest that the radical right was closer to the major parties in the early 1990s than the mid-2010s when it comes to addressing economic topics in manifestos. In short, while radical right parties seem to be saying more about the economy in their electoral manifestos over time, they are falling further behind rather than catching up with the major parties in their engagement of the subject.

Assessing the radical right placement over time, there is a systematic move to the economic center over the last decade and a half. Figure 2 gives support to H2 by demonstrating the shift of selected radical right parties from western Europe. While not all

lates very highly with the CHES standard deviations. Comparing this measure, estimated by Grzymala-Busse and Nalepa (2019) for eastern Europe, with CHES standard deviations produces a correlation of $r = 0.87$.

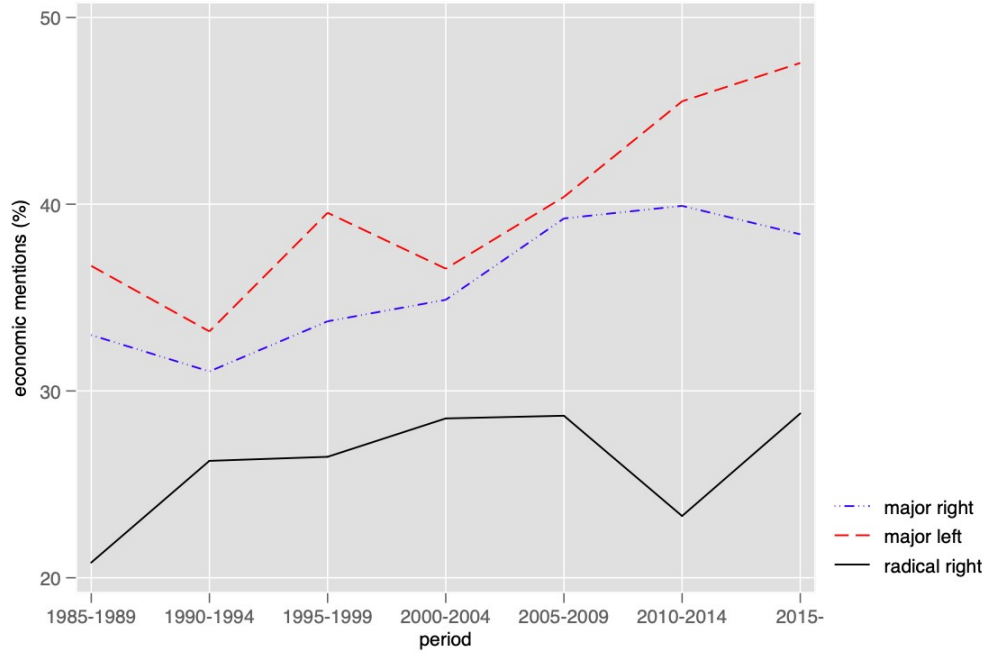


Figure 1: Salience of economic issues

Note: Manifesto Project Data, aggregated to half-decade periods.

parties demonstrate this trend equally, looking at the figure as a whole, an overall shift to the center is noticable. This general tendency to move from the right to the middle of the left-right economic continuum appears to be as true for radical right parties in the Nordic countries as it is for those in southern Europe, despite other important differences in these party systems, and divergent experiences of the economic crisis after 2008 (Polk and Rovny 2018).

An inferential analysis in Figure 3, predicting economic left-right placement as a function of party family, time, vote share, and government participation, further underlines the trend of the radical right moving towards the economic center. In 1999, the predicted economic left-right position for the radical right party family in western Europe was 7.33 on a 0-10 scale, where 10 equals the most economically right-wing. By 2017, the predicted position for the party family had moved to 5.97 on the same scale. This points to an overall economic moderation of radical right parties since the beginning of the millennium, a trend through which they pass from being to the right of major right parties to being

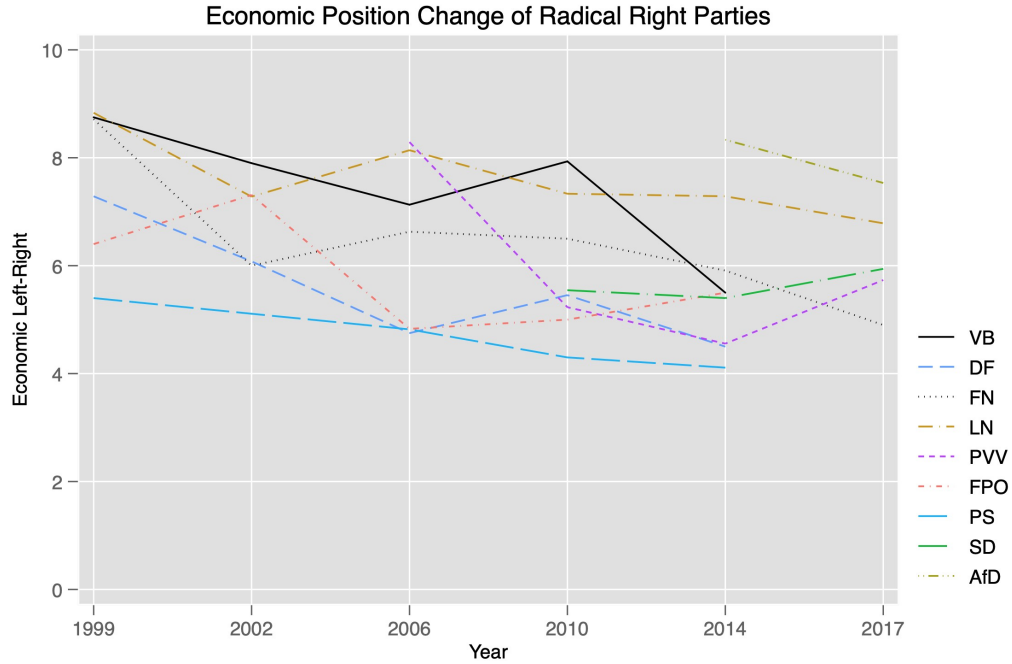


Figure 2: Economic position change of selected Radical Right parties

Note: CHES data. VB = Vlaams Belang, FN = Front National, PVV = Party for Freedom, PS = Finns Party, DF = Danish People's Party, LN = Lega Nord, FPO = Freedom Party of Austria, SD = Sweden Democrats, AfD = Alternative for Germany

significantly to the left of them.⁴

Simultaneously, while radical right parties move to the economic center, as placed by experts, the same experts continuously express higher levels of uncertainty over the positioning of these parties on economic issues. Supporting H3, the right panel of Figure 3 shows that experts have always demonstrated higher levels of uncertainty when evaluating radical right party positions on economic issues, compared to other party families. The standard deviations associated with the radical right placements are always significantly larger than those of other party families, and are even slightly increasing. This increase may be partly a function of the movement of the parties, since positional change is likely associated with increased uncertainty over the position.

⁴Interestingly, the 2017 observations, particularly of the radical left and major right, suggest a certain economic polarization across the political spectrum.

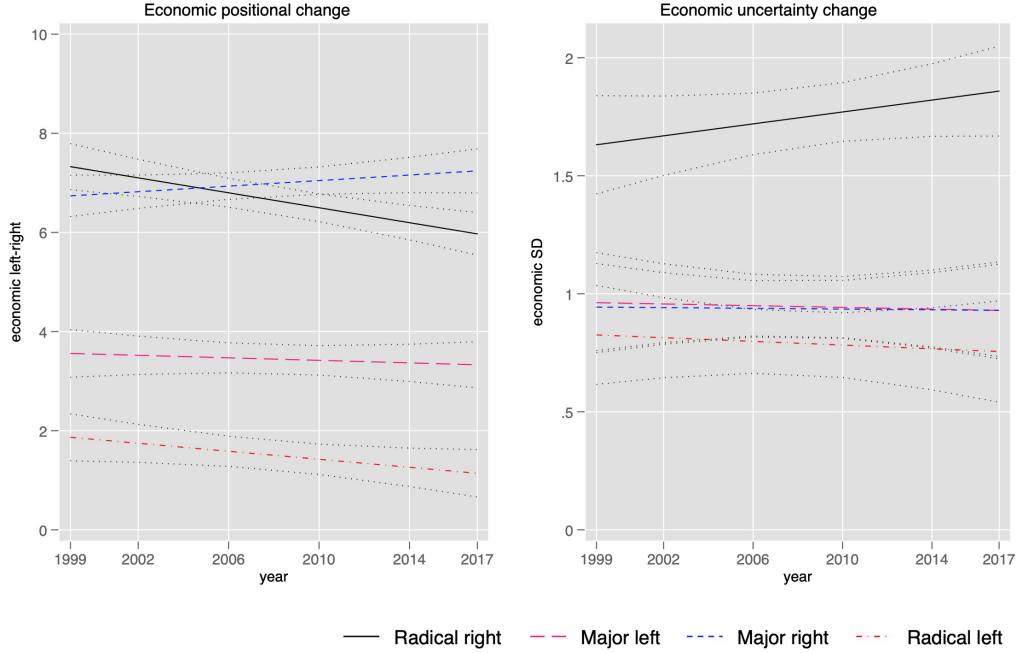


Figure 3: Economic position change and expert uncertainty

Note: CHES data.

Overall, this indicates greater inconsistency in the expert placements of radical right parties on the economic dimension than for other party families. While there are no doubt several reasons that experts disagree more on radical right party positioning on economic issues than they do over other party families, our assessment of clarity and uncertainty above suggests that a significant component of this uncertainty reflects the strategically blurry nature of radical right economic propositions.

A similar dynamic is observable when we consider one specific, but crucial, component of economic preferences: redistribution.⁵ While the data at this finer issue level is available only between 2006 and 2014, we note that radical right parties have been more redistributive than major right parties, which is visible in Figure 4. Across the three time periods for which we have data, the mean position of the radical right party family on redistribution is 5.5, whereas the mean position for the major right parties over this time

⁵Redistribution question wording: position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. 0 = Strongly favors redistribution...10 = Strongly opposes redistribution.

period is 6.4. Although there is some fluctuation across the three waves of data, the right panel of Figure 4 shows that expert uncertainty over radical right redistribution positions remains the highest of the four party families under consideration at all three time points.

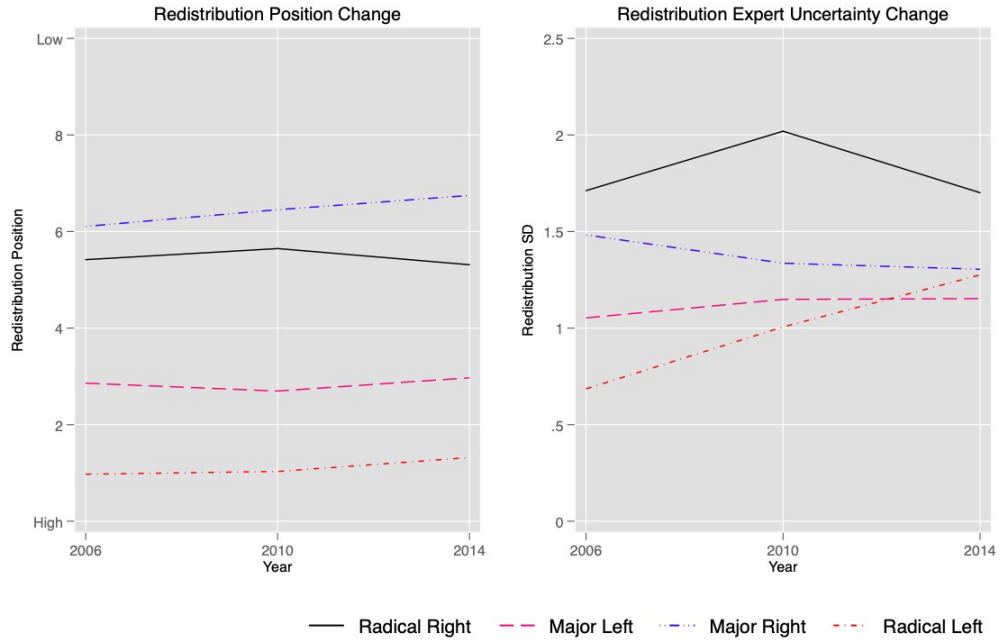


Figure 4: Redistribution position and expert uncertainty

Finally, to assess the source of the positional shift and the lack of clarity in radical right economic placement, we return to the party manifesto data, and assess the ideological direction of economic issues discussed in radical right party manifestos. We consider the share of left- and right-leaning economic mentions in radical right party manifestos.⁶ Figure 5 further supports H2, by demonstrating the significant increase in left-leaning economic references in radical right manifestos over time. This is coupled with a decrease

⁶Here we select a narrower set of clearly directional economic issues: Left = per403 (Market Regulation) + per404 (Economic Planning) + per406 (Protectionism: Positive) + per412 (Controlled Economy) + per413 (Nationalisation) + per415 (Marxist Analysis) + per504 (Welfare State Expansion); Right = per401 (Free Market Economy) + per402 (Incentives: Positive) + per407 (Protectionism: Negative) + per414 (Economic Orthodoxy) + per505 (Welfare State Limitation).

in right-wing economic mentions, which, however, stabilize by 2010.

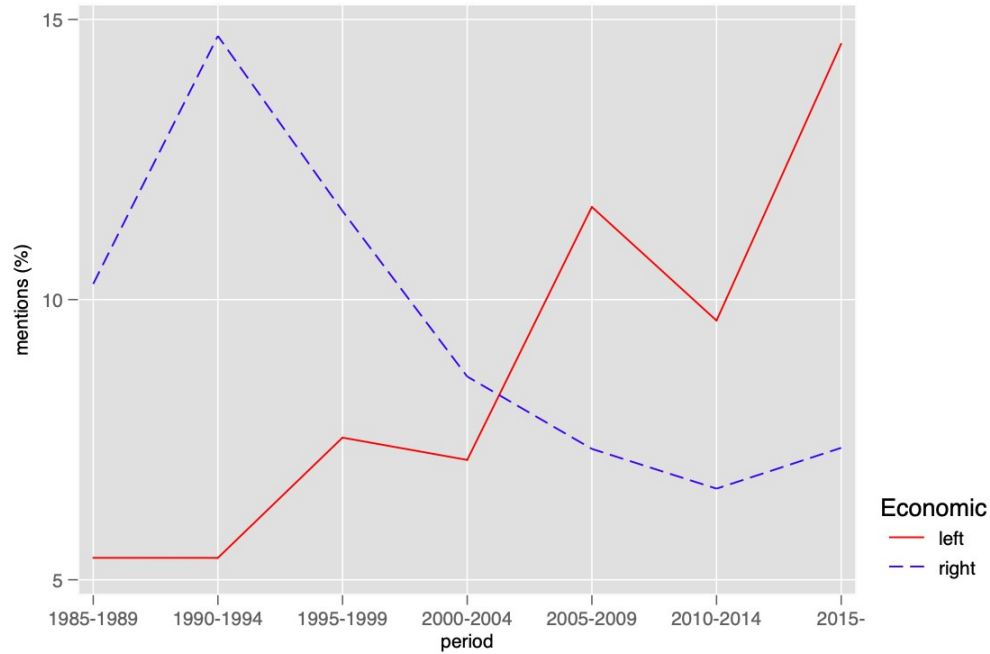


Figure 5: Share of left and right economic mentions in radical right manifestos

Note: Manifesto Project Data, aggregated to half-decade periods.

Overall, our analysis of manifestos and expert evaluations of radical right party placements over time suggests three key findings. First, there is evidence that radical right parties are being placed towards the economic center more often because of increased mentions of economically left-leaning issues, indicating an increase in the salience of economic issues for the party family. On average, radical right party positioning on redistribution is to the left of mainstream right wing political parties, which suggests that future research should continue probing the importance of welfare chauvinism for the radical right (following, e.g., Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016). Second, because they have shifted closer to the economic center over this time periods, radical right parties can no longer be described as decisively economically right-wing. Third, despite this position shift, expert uncertainty over radical right economic placement remains consistently high. While experts tend to place radical right parties near the center of the dimension, their uncertainty

over the current centrist placement is comparable to their previous uncertainty over their right-wing placement in the mid 2000s.⁷

Before moving on to our analysis of the relationship between party-voter congruence and support for party families across western Europe, we briefly look at two radical right parties in more detail, the French Front National (recently renamed the Rassemblement National) and the Sweden Democrats, to illustrate some of the blurring tendencies that are captured in the party-level data discussed above. These cases reveal similarities in the strategies of a radical right party in a Nordic country and one in continental/southern Europe, despite substantial differences in the party systems of these two countries (Polk and Rovny 2018).

The Front National and the Sweden Democrats

The French Front National (FN), one of the oldest radical right parties in post-war Europe, is being steered into a more mainstream direction in the last years. After taking over the party leadership from her father, Marine Le Pen is attempting what the French call ‘dédiabolisation’ – presenting the party as a responsible governmental alternative, supposedly purged of its racism and anti-semitism associated with the past leadership of Jean Marie Le Pen. In effect, the ‘normalization’ drive of Marine Le Pen centers largely on a revamped economic program of the party. To be sure, the ideological core of the party remains, typically for the radical right, focused on national sovereignty, anti-immigration, tough law and order measures, and national defense. The updated economic program, however, is notable for being both left-leaning, while simultaneously somewhat contradictory and couched in non-economic language.

The FN’s economic program, as outlined in Marine Le Pen’s 2017 presidential campaign “144 presidential pledges” (144 Engagements), is fundamentally protectionist and conspicuously left-leaning. It seeks to reinstate French (industrial) production through

⁷This finding is additionally important from a measurement perspective. One might expect that centrist positions – unlike positions near the extremes of a measurement scale – are the product of high uncertainty. That is, if individual experts place radical right parties all over the scale, the aggregate placement of the radical right party family will be centrist with high uncertainty. However, the fact that expert uncertainty remains roughly the same, while the aggregate placement of the family shifts to the center, suggests that this observation is not a function of increasing uncertainty, but rather a function of a positional shift. In fact, the correlation between economic positional change and economic positional uncertainty (expert standard deviation) of radical right parties is $r = -0.19$, suggesting that greater positional shifts are weakly associated with smaller uncertainty, thus, if anything, movement coincides with clearer positions.

state support and in opposition to “speculative finance”; to support French firms against unfair international competition; and to refuse free-trade agreements. Furthermore, the program focuses on social security, proposing, for example, the reduction of retirement age from current 62 to 60 years of age; the financial support of lowest earners payed for by a tax on imports; the maintenance of the 35 hour work week; or the support of housing construction and refurbishment.

Simultaneously, the FN program seems to blur its economic promises. Besides the extensive discussion of social support, the program also calls for 10% tax reduction on the first three tax levels, which concerns all incomes below roughly 70,000 euros per year. This sounds like a significant tax break. However, Le Monde warns that this is simply electoral marketing, and that since the change concerns percentages and not percentage points, it would be rather cosmetic – “Nothing revolutionary or ambitious compared to the tax policy conducted for several decades and to the tax programs of other candidates” (Le Monde 20.2.2017). Additionally, the program speaks of various right-leaning propositions in the name of cost-cutting, such as administrative simplification, reduction of social charges payed by employers, while enforcing the importance of individual choice in schooling (supporting private schools), or the support of independent healthcare providers (144 Engagements).

Ultimately, the FN program extensively couches its economic proposals in non-economic, nationalist language. To start with, the program is labeled a “*patriotic* model favoring employment” (144 Engagements). Many of its proposals refer to “the French,” be it French workers who need protection, the French who need affordable healthcare, or French families who need support and access to housing. This label is perhaps deliberately vague, technically referring to all French citizens, but – through its frequent use in the program – suggesting a nativist distinction between “the French by origin” and “the others”. This nativist sense is underlined in the preamble of the document which speaks of “public finance squandering via totally uncontrolled immigration” (144 Engagements).

The FN can thus be characterized as having moved somewhat towards the economic left pole since Marine Le Pen took over the party in 2011. However, the economic program of the FN is primarily welfare chauvinistic, underlined by cultural matters, while also including a number of typically right-wing proposals. Its core focus is on economic protectionism from the foreign outside – be it international finance, transnational corporations, international trade, or foreign workers. On the domestic front, it combines left-leaning calls for social protection with right-leaning calls for tax and cost reduction. Simultaneously, many of its economic proposals are attached to cultural concerns over immigration which continues to form the front and center of the party’s political profile.

In the Swedish parliament, economic left-right divisions have historically dominated voting patterns, but this changed when the Sweden Democrats entered parliament in

2010. Today, parliamentary left-right voting – while still the norm – is at an all-time low (Lindvall et al. 2017, 2019), which reflects a restructuring of political conflict brought about, at least in part, by the Sweden Democrats’ emphasis on questions of immigration and integration (Aylott and Bolin 2019).

The decline of left-right voting in the Riksdag since the Sweden Democrats’ (SD) gained parliamentary representation in 2010 indicates that the SD prioritizes political issues other than those related to economic left-right. Looking more closely at the voting behavior of the Sweden Democrats (SD) in parliament further suggests a blurry economic profile for the party. Between 2010-2014, the SD primarily voted with the centre-right Alliance government, but this switched when a Social Democratic-Green Party coalition took over after the 2014 election, and the SD began voting more with the Red-Green government (Lindvall et al. 2017, 2019).⁸ Even though much of this can be attributed to the legislative agenda setting powers of the government in the Swedish system, it is still telling that the Sweden Democrats could move rather seamlessly between ideological blocs that were defined by their opposition to one another on economic left-right politics.⁹

A recent Radio Sweden interview with SD party leader Jimmie Åkesson in the run-up to the 2018 elections clearly highlights the centrality of immigration and ambiguity of left-right politics for the Sweden Democrats. When asked why voters should choose his party, Åkesson’s first response was that SD is the anti-immigration party in Sweden. When asked to place the party on the left-right scale, Åkesson replied “I don’t like that scale; it’s old. If I have to, I would place us in the middle.”¹⁰ He goes on to suggest that if the welfare system and economics is the point of reference, the party is in the middle, maybe a little left. The interview succinctly reinforces our major arguments. Given the opportunity to define the party for voters, the Sweden Democrat’s party leader immediately emphasized their anti-immigration stance. At the same time, he demonstrated a desire not to discuss the party in terms of economic left-right, and presented a somewhat fuzzy centrist position when pressed on the matter.

Finally, and previewing our next section on voter preferences, at the level of individual voters, immigration concerns appear to be driving support for the Sweden Democrats. When voters perceive the other Swedish parties as having converged on left-right economic

⁸Overall, the SD still tends to side most with the center-right Alliance parties since entering parliament in 2010.

⁹Sundell, Anders. (2015 May 22) “Sverigedemokraterna röstar oftare med Socialdemokraterna än med Moderaterna.” *Politologerna*.
<https://politologerna.wordpress.com/2015/05/22/sverigedemokraterna-rostar-oftare-med-socialdemokraterna-an-med-moderaterna/>

¹⁰(2018 August 16) “Jimmie Åkesson: We are the Anti-Immigration Party.” *Radio Sweden*. <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=7021114>.

policy, it does not increase support for the Sweden Democrats. In contrast, when voters see the other parties as having converged on immigration, the Sweden Democrats receive increased support (Loxbo 2014). Taken together, the evidence presented here and in contemporaneous media reports suggest that the Sweden Democrats are a party that prioritizes its anti-immigration stance, would prefer not to emphasize economic left-right politics, and has less developed and fixed positions on the latter dimension.¹¹

These results suggest that despite the fact that radical right parties are generally shifting their stances to the left by including more explicitly left-wing proposals in their economic discourse, this discourse remains blurry, at least in comparison with their vocal stances on issues of immigration. This is likely caused by the fact that explicit left-wing economic statements are still combined with other, more right-leaning proposals. For example, the Front National in its program, which includes various left-wing economic proposals, boldly asserts that taxes “must remain as low as possible ... [so as to] not [be] seen as a burden” (Front National 2016: 70, translated by authors). Similarly, the Sweden Democrats argued for an increase in the minimum guaranteed pension for retirees but also voted against a proposal that would have reduced the taxes on pensions.¹²

Voting for the Radical Right

We now turn to consider the calculus of individuals when expressing their propensity to vote for the radical right and other parties. The main aim is to explore the varying effects of issue congruence on support for the radical right and other party families. It is reasonable to expect that voters support parties with policy positions that are closer to their preferences. However, the crucial question is, closer on what? We expect that the answer will differ across party families. In this empirical section, we use the European Election Study to construct congruence scales between party and voter positions. Our data allow us to focus on three relevant political issues that were measured in the CHES and EES data in 2014. These issues are: redistribution; immigration; and individual lifestyle (which closely relates to questions of LGBTQ rights). Since these items were on the same 0-10 response scales, we measure congruence as the absolute distance of the

¹¹Tomas Nordenskiöld, Linda Öhrn, Fredrik Öjemark. (2015 September 14) “Företagen och SD ses i smyg” (2016 August 28) *Dagens Industri*.
<https://www.di.se/di/artiklar/2015/9/14/foretagen-och-sd-ses-i-smyg/>

¹²(2016 August 28) “Sweden Democrats try to woo pensioners.” *The Local SE*. Retrieved from: <http://www.thelocal.se/20160828/sweden-democrats-try-to-woo-elderly-with-pensions>.

voter's position and her reported vote choice.¹³

We then model how congruence on the three issues predicts voters' propensity to vote for different party families. The propensity to vote (PTV) for a particular party is measured in the EES survey by asking respondents how likely (on a scale from 1-11) it is that they would ever vote for each party in their party system. Championed by van der Eijk et al. (1996, 2006), PTVs have a significant advantage over self-reported vote choice for our purposes. This is because a reported vote choice is just one nominal piece of information, while PTVs give us an almost continuous scale of preference for all surveyed parties.¹⁴ In order to study PTVs, we stack our dataset so that the unit of observation is voter-party evaluation. Our N thus becomes the number of respondents times the number of parties they assess. Since each respondent's observation is multiplied by the number of times she evaluated a party, we correct our standard errors by clustering them by respondent.

An important challenge with PTV analysis is that control variables cannot be assessed in a normal additive manner, like in regular regression, given the stacked nature of the dataset. To overcome this, van der Eijk et al. (1996) suggest separately regressing each control variable on the PTV for every given party. The results of these regressions indicate the extent to which the given control variable predicts the propensity to support a given party. These regressions produce predicted values, or \hat{y} s for each individual and each party, and their centered values – that is the differences between the individual predicted values and the \hat{y} means – are then entered into the stacked dataset, where they are used as control variables (see van der Eijk et al. 1996: 348).

We proceed first by measuring the congruence (positional closeness) between the preferences of individuals and party positions on the three specific areas or policy issues. In a second step we predict the reported propensity to vote for different party families as a function of the positional congruence on these three issues, the party family, and an interaction between positional congruence and family. This final term models our theoretical expectation that congruence on particular policy issues will matter differently across party families. Our models control for key socio-economic characteristics of the individual respondents: gender, age, religiosity, and self-declared social class. Our model can thus be generally mathematically expressed in the following way for individuals i and parties j :

¹³Differences in question wording in prior surveys limit our analysis to the single time point, 2014.

¹⁴Another advantage of PTVs is that they do not rely on recalled vote choice, which could be fallible because survey respondents tend to overstate their support for winners (Wright 1993) or due to other cognitive limitations.

$$\begin{aligned}
Vote_{propensity_{ij}} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 issue_congruence_{ij} + \beta_2 party_family_j \\
& + \beta_3 issue_congruence_{ij} * party_family_j + \beta_n controls_i + E_{ij}
\end{aligned}$$

The results, presented in Figure 6 and detailed in the appendix, reveal striking differences between the effects of issue congruences on the propensity to vote for various party families. The top left panel of Figure 6 demonstrates that congruence with the radical right's views on redistribution has no effect on the propensity to vote for the party family, while congruence on redistribution tends to do a better job at predicting vote propensity for the other party families. Thus, in this analysis, agreeing with the radical right on questions of redistribution has no impact on the likelihood of ever voting for a party from that family.¹⁵

The opposite is true for the issue of immigration. As the top right panel of Figure 6 shows, congruence on immigration with the radical right has a strong positive effect on the propensity to vote for this type of party. Thus agreeing with the radical right on questions of immigration makes one very likely to vote for a member of this party family.

The bottom left panel of Figure 6 shows that the effect of social lifestyle congruence on the propensity to vote for the radical right is modest. The relatively unremarkable effect of social lifestyle congruence on support for the radical right could reflect a move away from overtly critical positions on LGBTQ rights within this party family in western Europe (Berntzen 2018), and reinforces one of our central points, that it is first and foremost immigration preferences that drive voter support for the radical right in the region.

Finally, we turn to consider a possible interaction effect between redistribution congruence and economic salience, as well as between redistribution congruence and economic blurring, on the propensity to vote for different parties. In this, slightly more complex, step the equation for individuals i and parties j is:

$$\begin{aligned}
Vote_propensity_{ij} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 redistribution_congruence_{ij} + \beta_2 Z_j + \beta_3 party_family_j \\
& + \beta_4 redistribution_congruence_{ij} * party_family_j \\
& + \beta_5 Z_j * party_family_j + \beta_6 redistribution_congruence_{ij} * Z_j \\
& + \beta_7 redistribution_congruence_{ij} * Z_j * party_family_j \\
& + \beta_8 immigration_congruence_{ij} + \beta_9 lifestyle_congruence_{ij} \\
& + \beta_n controls_i + E_{ij}
\end{aligned}$$

¹⁵We re-estimated our results with country fixed effects as well as using hierarchical linear models with random intercepts at the country and individual levels, leading to substantively identical conclusions.

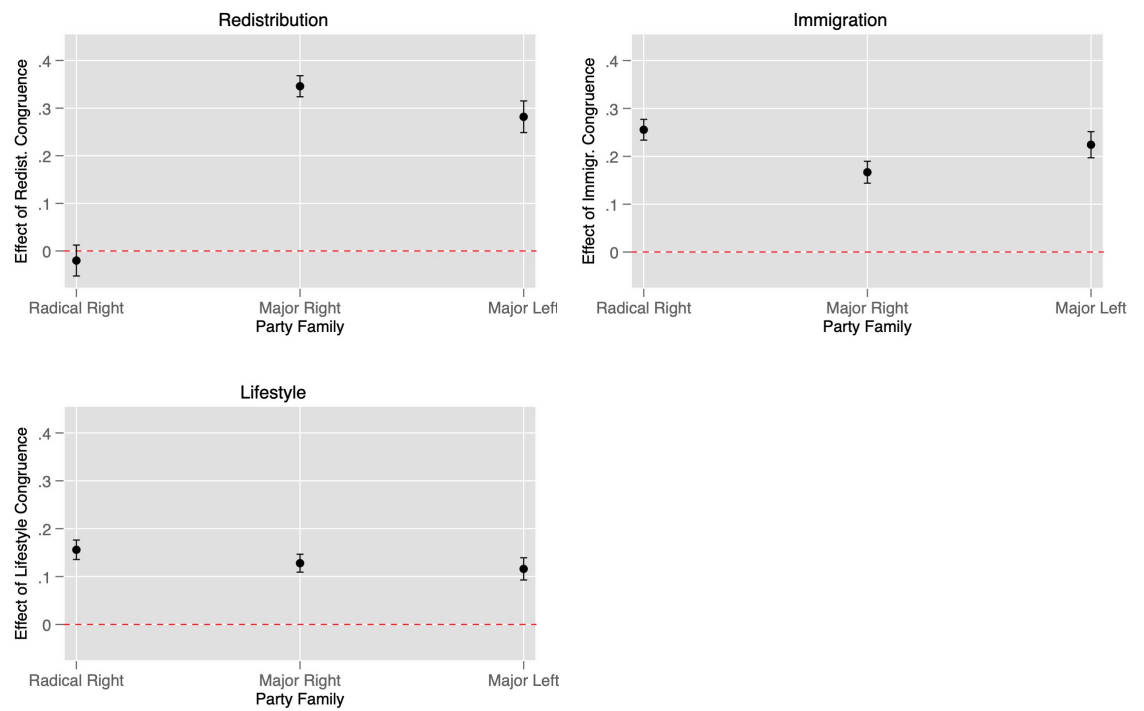


Figure 6: Predicting propensity to vote with congruence

Note: Average marginal effects of congruence on the propensity to vote with 95% confidence intervals.

Here Z is the moderating variable – either economic salience or economic blurring manifested by the party.

The results are summarized in figure 7, and the details are available in tables 6 and 7 in the appendix. The left panel of the figure demonstrates that as economic salience increases, redistribution congruence has an increasingly positive effect on the propensity to vote for radical right parties. However, note that the highest level of radical right economic salience in this sample is 46.2%, at which the effect of redistribution congruence on the propensity to vote for the radical right is very modest. There is no significant interaction effect for other parties, as redistribution congruence has a strong effect on the propensity to vote for a party, more or less regardless of the emphasis it places on economic issues. The right panel of figure 7 underlines the effect of blurring. As party blurriness on economic issues increases, the effect of redistribution congruence on the propensity to vote for them decreases. This effect is relatively weak and statistically insignificant for radical right parties, but strong for other parties. Overall, redistributive congruence between voters and the radical right seems to have modest to low impact on radical right electoral support, even when these parties are relatively clear on economic issues and place larger emphasis on economics. This may be a function of their histories that eschewed economic topics relative to cultural ones, and relative to other party families.¹⁶

This analysis points to the important conclusion that the proximity, or congruence, of voters to parties tends to significantly determine the likelihood of voters supporting these parties. Crucially for our argument, and consistent with prior research on the importance of issue salience for vote choice and representation (e.g. Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Giger and Lefkofridi 2014; Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014), this effect differs across policy issues and party families. While knowledge of proximity between a voter and a radical right party on the issue of immigration is a strong indication that this person is very likely to vote for the radical right, the same information has more limited predictive power if the policy issue under consideration is redistribution.

Our analysis further demonstrates that voters of radical right parties largely discount the congruence between their economic positions and those of the parties they support – they are willing to support these parties no matter how close or distant on the issue of redistribution they are from them. This is moderated by partisan salience and to a small extent by issue clarity. When radical right parties emphasize economic issues, party-voter congruence on redistribution begins to play a modest role. When parties hold vague stances on economic issue, party-voter congruence on redistribution is a poor predictor of

¹⁶We re-estimated our results with country fixed effects as well as using hierarchical linear models with random intercepts at the country and individual levels, leading to substantively identical conclusions.

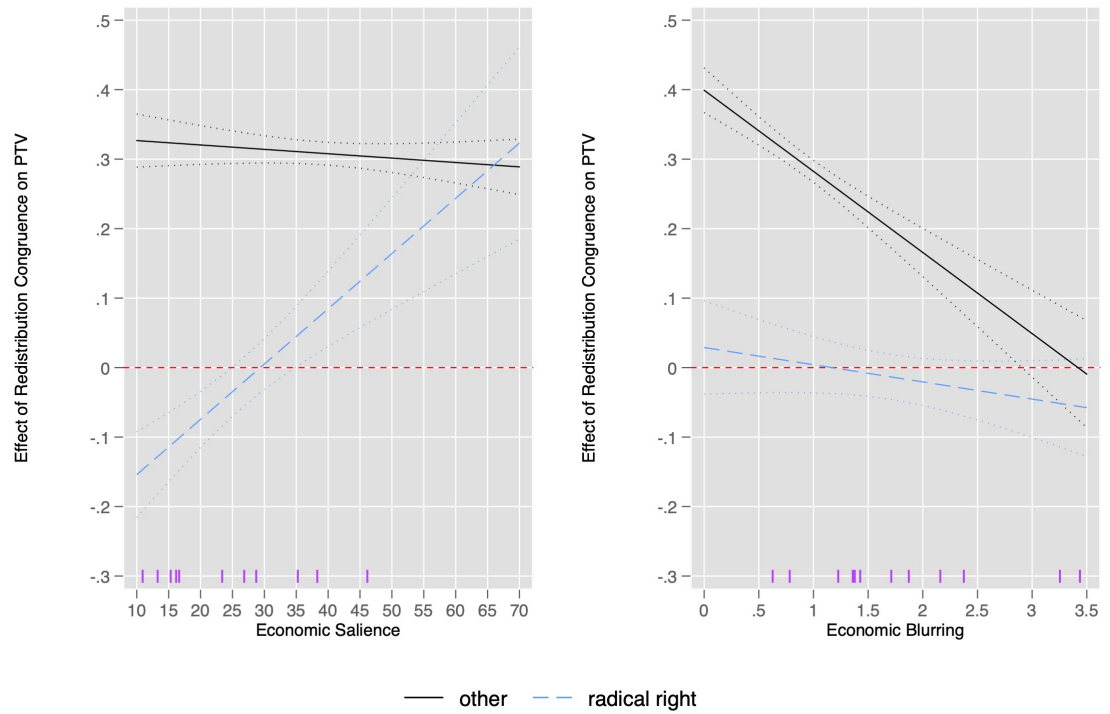


Figure 7: Predicting propensity to vote with interactions

Note: Predicted marginal effect of redistribution congruence on the propensity to vote while economic salience / blurring change, across radical right and other parties. 95% confidence intervals included. Controls held constant. Rug plot places radical right parties on x axis.

vote propensity. Overall, the choice for the radical right is, as prior analyses suggest (e.g. van der Brug et al. 2000, Ivarsflaten 2008), firmly rooted in the ideological congruence between these parties and voters on cultural issues, particularly immigration. Voters support the radical right when they agree with its anti-immigrant agenda, no matter their economic profiles.

Conclusion

This article departed from an empirical puzzle. Radical right parties are invested in cultural issues predominantly related to national sovereignty and opposition to immigration, and their economic platforms seem underspecified, contradictory and vague. Simultaneously, various analysts have observed the crystallization of more explicitly left-wing economic proposals on the part of some radical right parties, which raises the question whether the radical right is moving towards the economic left, and taking clearer economic stances.

Our theoretical expectations suggested that radical right parties face a strategic opportunity in blurring their economic stances, given that their primary focus rests on the cultural dimension, and that their potential supporters hold diverse economic preferences. Our analyses of issue salience, positioning, and voting behavior support these expectations. We find that radical right parties have increased their engagement with economic issues, consistent with our first hypothesis, indicating that the salience of economic issues has increased among these parties. In line with our second hypothesis, radical right parties have indeed generally moved from the right side of the economic spectrum to the center, and we present evidence that this shift, as perceived by party experts, tracks the increase of more explicitly left-wing proposals in the electoral manifestos of radical right parties. Our analysis, however, also suggests that, despite the general expert consensus that radical right parties are more centrist than right-wing on economics, these parties remain vague in their economic message, as anticipated by our third hypothesis. The relatively low level of expert agreement on radical right party economic placements has not changed. This indicates that the more explicitly leftist proposals of the radical right come amid other, right-leaning suggestions.

Supplementing the party-level analysis described above with individual-level information, we find that voters do not seem to be systematically affected by the general economic shift of the radical right, which supports our fourth and final hypothesis. The propensity to vote for the radical right is strongly predicted by voter-party congruence on immigration, lifestyle congruence has a moderate effect, while congruence on redistribution has no statistical effect. Redistribution congruence can come to matter only in the rare cases

where radical right parties emphasize economic issues. Overall, voters continue to listen to the cultural message of the radical right, while paying little attention to the economic message with its blurry vagueness.

Future studies may see the radical right decisively shift to the economic left, standing up for the left-authoritarian quadrant of the political space which is currently relatively underpopulated by parties in western Europe. To that end, continued attention to changes in the supply and demand side of economically left but culturally conservative politics, such as welfare chauvinism, is one productive avenue for future research (e.g. Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016). For now, the radical right continues to be primarily a champion of cultural conservatism, while its economic profile remains strategically blurry.

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