

# Why are the Radical Right better at capitalising on ‘Populism’ than the Radical Left?

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## Abstract

Radical right parties across Europe have performed considerably well in national parliamentary elections across Europe in the post-economic crisis period (2015-2018). In a number of cases, the radical right have outperformed both traditional centre-left and centre-right parties. At the same time, radical left parties have also performed well electorally, yet have not performed as well compared to radical right parties. It is not clear why this is the case and few studies in the literature have analysed the electoral fortunes of both party families simultaneously. This article draws on comparative and case study analyses in investigating this research question in the post-economic crisis period providing an original contribution to the populism and party politics literature. Our central argument is that radical right parties were able to perform better electorally than the radical left by channelling fear, alongside their appeal on identity-based politics, on issues such as immigration.

*Keywords: Radical Right; Radical Left; Populism; Refugee Crisis; Fear*

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## 1. Introduction

In Europe, the period of the global financial crisis and of the Eurozone crisis (2008-2013) saw the relative ‘rise’ of populist radical left parties. Radical left parties benefited from both economic and anti-austerity policies in this electoral context (Gomez, Morales, and Ramiro 2015). However, in the post-economic crisis period (2015-2018), the Radical Left in Europe was not able to perform as well in electoral terms, with the Populist Radical Right emerging as the political winner in many European Union (EU) Member States (see Downes, 2019). The primary aim of this paper is to examine how Populist Radical Right parties in Europe were able to take advantage of their focus on the immigration crisis in the post-economic crisis period (Downes and Loveless 2018; Ivarsflaten 2008; Mudde 2007). This was achieved by being perceived as close to the people and opposed to the elite, through a dual mechanism that consisted of: (1) the ‘strategic’ use of fear alongside (2) the trivialisation of the political rhetoric.

Since 2015 in Europe, radical right parties have been increasingly able to outperform traditional ‘mainstream’ centre-left and centre-right parties electorally, particularly in national parliamentary (legislative) elections. In Italy, the *Lega Nord* (*Northern League*) has been more electorally successful than the centre-right Forza Italia (Forward Italy) in the last political legislative election, going from 4% in the 2014 European Parliament election, to more than 17%, almost equal to the centre-left *Partito Democratico* (*The Democratic Party*) under the leadership of Matteo Renzi. In the 2017 French Presidential and national parliamentary elections, a newly conceived party, Macron’s *En Marche* ended up defeating the radical right *Front National* (*National Front*) of Marine Le Pen. However, from late 2018 onwards a dramatic electoral decline occurred for Macron’s *En Marche* (*On The Move*).

The 2008-13 economic crisis resulted in widespread anti-incumbency effects (particularly for centre-left parties) and provides an explanation as to how radical left and to a lesser extent radical right parties outperformed “mainstream parties” in the economic crisis election cycle (Downes and Loveless 2018). However, in the period 2015-2018, European radical left parties were outperformed by the radical right. This represents an important gap that remains under-researched in the party politics literature. Thus, much less is known about the core factors that lie behind the increased electoral performance of radical right parties in comparison to radical left parties. Therefore, this article seeks to examine how radical right parties in Europe were able to outperform the radical left in the post-economic crisis period that has been characterised by patterns of high electoral volatility (i.e. anti-incumbency effects for mainstream political parties).

Populism is at the centre of the contemporary political debate in European politics. Since the Eurozone crisis (2008-2013), the landmark Brexit vote in 2016, the election of Trump as United States (US) President and the ongoing refugee crisis in the EU, the topic has been continuously mentioned by the mainstream media. The term "populism" has been used to label a number of recent political events; with the issue appearing on the agenda of major regional and international conferences. At the same time, the academic literature has now started to devote more attention to the political phenomenon, with authors such as Ernesto Laclau being rediscovered by scholars in recent times.

However, the modern-day term of ‘populism’ is arguably an abstract and loose concept, lacking a clear analytical definition. One of the world’s leading experts on populism, Cas Mudde (2014) has defined populism as a “thin” ideology, in being easily adaptable to multiple socio-political contexts and highly heterogenous in terms of its core political features. Populism has a wide range of political issues, most notably: ranging from socialist characteristics (current Polish government) to extreme right xenophobic propaganda (US President Donald Trump, President Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Lega Nord in Italy) an environmentalist focus (Movimento Cinque Stelle) to overly nationalistic positions (Front National) and fight corruption (Mexico’s Lopez Obrador). Thus, “populism” can be conceived as the ideology of the conflict between the pure people and the corrupted elites (Mudde 2014). However, it is important to differentiate between different forms of contemporary “populism” in European party politics.

The radical right is generally capable of being widely accredited as being close to people's needs and fears. The radical right does this by deploying a simple and trivial language, offering citizens a polarised political message to attract its key voters. The immigration crises in Europe from 2014-2015 offers a clear example of the capacity of radical right parties to present themselves as capable to respond to citizens' fears, frustrations and anger. The radical left is perceived as closer to the elites and the mainstream political parties: Radical left parties are still viewed as a tool of abstract discussion for intellectuals, producing complex political messages. Moreover, the radical left is generally perceived as being excessively close to the mainstream left (such as the social democratic party family) which is the party family in Europe that has recently suffered major electoral setbacks (Downes, Loveless and Lam 2018; Downes and Chan 2018)<sup>§</sup>.

Therefore, the central research question of this article investigates how populist radical right parties can outperform populist radical left parties in the post-economic crisis period. The article proceeds by discussing the existing literature in the fields of populism and party politics and then introduces theoretical frameworks that allow us to investigate the divergent 'populist' strategies adopted by both populist radical right and left-wing parties alike. The empirical analysis draws on recent national parliamentary election data at the aggregate level alongside qualitative case study analysis. The conclusion of the article then examines the implications of the empirical findings for the future of party competition in Europe and more broadly what they mean for different forms of 'populism' in twenty-first century European politics.

## **2. Literature and Definitions**

Before proceeding with the review of the literature covering in this paper, it is first important to provide a rationale for why we focus on our specific timeframe of 2015–2018 that covers the refugee crisis period. Since the global financial and economic crisis began in 2008, the EU has been hit by a number of crises of different natures. This “decade of crises” and crisis management for the EU includes crises ranging from the context of

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<sup>§</sup> In particular for its excessive sympathetic stance towards globalisation and international issues rather than focusing on the needs of citizens domestically.

austerity and the 2008–2013 economic crisis, to Brexit in 2016 and the ‘rise’ of populist radical right parties in the ongoing refugee crisis period (Downes 2019).

Most significantly, the ongoing refugee crisis has arguably been most decisive factor behind the ‘rise’ and growing influence of populist radical right parties, together with the austerity policies implemented in the EU following the Eurozone crisis that benefited a number of populist radical right parties. Therefore, the sole focus of this article is on the 2015–2018 electoral cycle that coincides with the refugee crisis context and forms the bedrock of our empirical analysis in this paper.

Recent years have seen a number of authoritative general studies on populism (see Stanley 2008; Kaltwasser 2012; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017). More recently, in the US and Europe, the “rise of populism” has been put in connection with the crisis of liberal democracies (Kriesis and Pappas, 2015; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017; Mounk 2018) and in particular of the Left (Berman 2016, 2017). Other studies have also pointed at the possible relation between decline of US Hegemony and liberal world order with rise of populisms in Europe (in particular: Parsi 2018). For a more focused theoretical perspective, it is possible to mention at least McCormick (2001), Canovan (2004), Janses (2011), Moffitt and Tormey (2014), and in particular the *A Political Theory of populism* by Acemoglu, Egorov and Sonin.

Regarding specific studies into the radical right and radical left, the number of studies concerning the former is significantly higher than studies regarding the latter. For instance, a number of notable works have been published into radical and extreme right populism, including Betz (1994; 2003), Rydgren (2003; 2005; 2005b), Mouffe (2005), Swank and Betz (2003). Meanwhile, few have focused on radical left populism (see, for instance, Stravrakakis and Katsambekis (2014) regarding Syriza in Greece).

Fewer studies still have sought to compare the fortunes of populist radical right parties in comparison to populist radical left in Europe (Bruno and Downes 2018; 2018b; 2018c), while there are a number of works dealing specifically with the role of fear in populism (Chevigny 2003; Lukacs 2005; Stewart 2012; Wodak 2015; Bruno 2018). Thus, our article seeks to fill the gap pertaining to the comparison of contemporary Radical Right parties in relation to Radical Left, and the capacity of the former to systematically outperform the Left in Europe.

## ***2.1. Defining Populism***

It is widely accepted that “Populism” is a thin, flexible and versatile ideology that separates society into two conflictual groups: a homogenous and an antagonistic group. The homogenous group are the “pure people”, whilst the antagonistic group are seen as the “corrupt political elite”, or political establishment. Most importantly, populism can be seen as the overall expression of the general will of the people. More specifically, it is possible to identify another key characteristic common to all “populisms”: it fiercely opposes the role of competence and technical expertise\*\*, affirming the principle that within democratic political systems, the democratic vote is the sole determinant, and thus cannot be substituted, nationally, by policy-making based on criteria of allegedly efficiency and effectiveness, and internationally, by grey forms of multi-level technocratic governance. (see Borrelli 2004).

## ***2.2. Defining the Radical Right***

Radical Right parties across Europe tend to share a large number of precise distinctive traits, although with some cultural differences, in particular regarding the role of the state and of individuals. One of the leading scholars on the far right, Cas Mudde (2014: 2017) has noted that there are three core features that sets apart the Radical Right party family from Centre-right, Centre-left and Radical Left parties. In summary, the key features of contemporary Radical Right parties are as follows: nativism, populism and authoritarianism.

The first feature of the populist Radical Right party family is a nativist ideology, where ethnocentric ideals and values are espoused which border on nationalistic and xenophobic sentiment. The nativist ideology also asserts the importance of the dominant ethnic in-group in society, arguing that this group, over an ethnic out-group such as immigrants that are deemed as threatening to the nation-state and the dominant in-group.

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\*\* The ancient Greeks used the term “*téchne*” (τέχνη) to refer to competence and expertise in a specific field (medical, military and even political *téchne*). The person possessing a *téchne* follows principles and rules (logos) and applies science.

The second feature of the populist Radical Right family is the advancement of populist ideals. As we have seen above, populism is an ideology that this party family uses to separate society into two groups: a homogenous and an antagonistic group. The homogenous group are the ‘pure people’, whilst the antagonistic group are seen as the corrupt political elite, or political establishment.

Most importantly, populism can be seen as the overall expression of the general will of the people. Radical right parties frequently deploy populist rhetoric when outlining the notion of the ‘corrupt political elite’ in supranational institutions such as the European Union through a ‘hard’ Eurosceptic strategy, as well as in domestic politics. The third feature that sets the contemporary Radical Right family apart from other contemporary party families in Europe is its authoritarian ideology, with these parties displaying a strong emphasis on law and order throughout society and security<sup>††</sup>.

### ***2.3. Defining the Radical Left***

In a similar manner to the Radical Right literature, the Radical Left is diverse and there are a number of different definitions in the literature. Recently, some scholars have suggested that there is a general consensus in the core features that make up the Radical Left. Far-left parties tend to encompass two main subtypes; ‘Radical’ Left and ‘extreme’ Left. They are not merely on the ‘left’ of social democracy and are clearly distinct. Notably, while the Radical Left tends to support forms of direct democracy, the extreme Left denounces liberal democracy. Scholars such as March and Mudde argue that the Radical Left is ‘Left’ in its identification of economic inequality as the basis of existing political and social arrangements and call for economic and social rights as its core principle agenda.

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<sup>††</sup> An important distinction must also be made between the terms ‘populist Radical Right’ and ‘extreme right’. Downes (2018) notes that populist Radical Right parties accept the democratic process and seek to become democratically elected through elections. However, populist Radical Right parties tend to challenge the more ‘liberal’ conception of democracy such as pluralism and minority rights. On the other hand, and in contrast to the Radical Right, extreme right-wing parties tend to be deeply sceptical of the democratic process and seek alternative means to achieving power other than through elections. Extreme right-wing parties also tend to be outwardly xenophobic and anti-Semitic in their core ideology. Contemporary examples of extreme right-wing parties include the *Golden Dawn Party* in Greece (XA), the *British National Party* in the United Kingdom (BNP) and the *National Democratic Party* in Germany (NPD).

It is ‘radical’ in that it proposes deep-rooted change to the socio-economic structure of contemporary capitalism that involves redistribution of resources from existing political elites. Furthermore, the radical left can be seen as internationalist in terms of its focus on cross-national networking and solidarity, and in its aim to put themselves in the vanguard of opposition to globalisation, neo-liberalism and imperialism.

**Table 1:** Core Ideological Features of Populist Radical Right and Populist Radical Left Parties in Europe (Mudde 2007; 2017, March 2005; 2011).

<b>Populist Radical Right</b>	<b>Populist Radical Left</b>
Nativism	Anti-Capitalist
Populism	Radical (Economic Inequality)
Authoritarianism	Internationalist

**Table 2:** Comparing the Populist Radical Right to the Populist Radical Left

	<b>Populist Radical Right</b>	<b>Populist Radical Left</b>
<b>Core Voters</b>	Disaffected Working Classes (‘lower’ levels of education) ‘Lower’ Middle Classes	Middle Class Voters (‘higher’ levels of education) ‘Metropolitan’ areas
<b>Key Voter Concerns</b>	Immigration European Union Nation-State	Capitalism Economic Inequality European Union Nation-State
<b>‘Protest’ Vote</b>	Stealing Voters from Centre-left and Centre-right Parties	Stealing Voters from Centre-left Parties
<b>Key Cases (Strong Electoral Performance)</b>	Austria (FPÖ) France (FN) Germany (AfD) Hungary (FIDESZ and JOBBIK) Italy (LEGA) The Netherlands (PVV)	Germany (DIE LINKE) Greece (SYRIZA) Portugal (BE and CDU) Spain (PODEMOS)

<b>Regional Trend (Strongest Support)</b>	Western Europe	Southern Europe
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As we have mentioned above, the core characteristics of “Populism” is that it can be broadly conceived as the ideology of conflict between the pure people and the corrupted elites. Thus, the issue of the perception of “closeness” to the People (and “distance” from the elites), has to emerge as fundamental in the researchers interested in understanding the constant and growing success of contemporary Radical Right parties, in Europe and in rest of the World<sup>‡‡</sup>. This is particularly evident for a specific family party in Europe: the Social Democrats. In the vast majority of EU member States, Social Democratic Parties (the “classic” center-Left), has suffered major losses. This poses a problem for the Radical Left in Europe. The Radical Left, for a plethora of historical and ideological reasons that vary from country to country, is still perceived as closer to the elites and the Social Democrats than the Radical Right is to center-Right<sup>§§</sup>. The Radical Right, on the contrary, is generally capable of being widely accredited as close to people’s needs and fears, even when it was close ally or supporter of mainstream parties, as in the case of the *Lega* with Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* in Italy. The Radical Left on the whole is perceived as being excessively close to the mainstream left (such as the social democratic party family), the party family in Europe that has recently suffered major electoral setbacks (see Downes, Loveless and Lam 2018; Downes and Chan 2018), in particular for its excessive sympathetic stance towards globalisation and international issues rather than focusing on the needs of citizens domestically.

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‡‡ Mainstream “classic” parties that have been advising political agenda supported by authorities, bodies, organizations (Central Banks, Regulatory Agencies, International Organizations, INGOs), institutional and economic establishments (multinational corporations, unions), media, renowned experts on specific complex issues, are easily targeted by Radical Rights campaigns as “close” to the Elites.

§§ The case of Italy is paradigmatic. During the last political election (March 2018), the Radical Left could be considered represented by the Party *Liberi E Uguali* (LeU), (as *Potere al Popolo*, a more radical party, was not able to be represented in Parliament). However, *LeU* was only recently established by representatives of the Left-wing of the *Partito Democratico*, at the time under Matteo Renzi’s leadership, who were in strong disagreement with Renzi. It is then understandable the striking proximity of *LeU* from the *Partito Democratico* and the difficulty for Radical Left to be perceived as different from Center-Left.

While Radical left parties, are still viewed as a tool of abstract discussion for intellectuals, producing complex political messages, the Radical Right, on the contrary uses a simple and rather trivial language, offering citizens a polarised political message. The immigration crises in Europe from 2014-2015 offers a clear example of the capacity of radical right parties to present themselves as capable to respond to citizens' fears, frustrations and anger, as can be seen in the case of Italy, where it is widely perceived as defending the interests of the shrinking middle class, hardly hit by the global economic crisis and the socio-economic austerity policies adopted in the European Union.

### **i. First mechanism: The Trivialisation of Politics**

A first mechanism that is key by the Radical Right populist parties in Europe to be perceived as “close to the People” is the so called *trivialisation* of politics, both at the level of languages that of contents (formally and materially). Trivialisation is responsible for the erosion of the public sphere by presenting over-simplified, and often polarising, accounts of political reality, strategically useful to build identity politics and conflictual mechanisms. Radical Right populist and nationalist movements do so by downgrading the quality of public political debate, by appealing directly to the citizens (“the pure People”, as we have seen), omitting on purpose every mechanisms of political intermediation provided by democratic institutions, crucial to the preservation of constitutional rights and the prevention of abuse of political power and the rule of law (bottom-up approach)\*\*\*.

Leaders of these political movements consider themselves entitled to speak on behalf of all the citizens (somehow resembling a poor version of the “General Will” conceived by Rousseau), thus completely eroding any possibility of constructive political discussion. Trivialisation, as a form of hyper-simplified communication, may also rely on the use of powerful and vivid images to evoke concrete, vivid threats of invasion or conspiracy. As

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\*\*\* In every liberal democracy lies an irreducible and unavoidable element of tension between “elected” and “un-elected”, that cannot be solved. In this regards, Technocracies and Populisms do have somehow a dialectic relation with “constitutional or liberal democracy” (democracy limited by the “Constitution” or by the “Right” (as Rule of Law). From one side, Institutions need to be democratically legitimised (necessary vivifying role of the “majority”, yet possible illiberal use of it by populisms); from the other, non-elective constitutional power (key in every constitutionalism) possesses, by logic, some technocratic traits.

we will see shortly by focusing on the mechanism of evoking and addressing fear, the arguments used by Radical Rights appeal to plain irrational feelings, by portraying fallacious narratives such as the “conspiracy of the financial markets,” the “immigrant invasions,” or the “Muslim threat.”

**ii. Second Mechanism: Evoking and addressing Fears**

Strictly connected with the trivialisation of politics and use of over-simplified and vivid language, is the capacity of *evoking and addressing fear*, the second mechanism allowing Radical Rights parties to engage and gain growing electoral support from citizens in Europe. To this regards, Roger Petersen’s social psychological model of fear, clearly show how (a) emotions and (b) fear are utilised/deployed by populist parties to take advantage of the context of tension and instability they concur to shape. This is an *ad hoc* subtle mechanism that allows, at the same time and rather ambiguously, the Radical Right to evoke fear (by producing and amplifying it) and being perceived as the *only* real political subject capable to contrast that fear. The immigrants, Muslim citizens, the EU technocratic Institutions, the financial markets, have all been used as “enemies”, in order to genuinely and on purpose evoke fears within vast layers of democratic societies by Radical Right parties. These enemies have been opposed by vaguely mentioning the necessity to focus on local citizens (“Our citizens first!”, “Christian values first!”) or giving priority to local citizens needs (national sovereignty against austerity policies proposed by arrogant EU technocrats; advocating against the conspiracy designed by the financial markets and the rating agencies).

**iii. Third Mechanism: focus on local issues, on middle and lower classes**

A third mechanism allowing Radical Rights parties to be perceived as “close” the People is the strong focus and priority given to local instead of regional and international issues, affirming a decisive opposition to multilateral forms of governance, which are labeled as undemocratic mechanisms of technocratic top-down approach to domestic

politics<sup>†††</sup>. As already mentioned in the introduction (Borrelli 2004), Populist Radical Rights parties are strong opponents of political movements supporting multilateral governance and international/regional fora of discussion for policy-making.

By focusing on local issues rather than regional and international, the Radical Right populist parties in Europe have gained vast electoral support especially among not only middle-class voters (“disillusioned” by the backlash of globalisation and perceiving somehow correctly their socio-economic status as shrinking) but also among “working class” voters, once a sound electoral pool for Radical Left parties. In particular, this can be seen in a growing ‘re-nationalisation’ of corporations around the world (May and Nölke 2018)<sup>‡‡‡</sup>. If we add to this, the two above mentioned mechanisms of evoking/addressing fears and the trivialisation of politics, we can understand more correctly the capacity of Radical Right to conquer vast portions of citizens at the electoral pools, as we will precisely see later in the empirical part of the article.

**Table 3:** Comparing the “Emphasis” on populism by Radical Right and Radical Left Parties in Europe

	<b>Populist Radical Right</b>	<b>Populist Radical Left</b>
<b>Use of simple and trivial language</b>	✓	
<b>Polarised political message</b>	✓	✓

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††† A very recent example can be considered the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), which was not signed by Ministry of Interior Matteo Salvini, who stated: “Just like the Swiss, who carried forward the Global Compact up until yesterday and then said 'everyone stop', the Italian government will not sign anything and will not go to Marrakech,” Salvini told the Lower House”. In particular, see ANSA: [http://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2018/11/28/italy-not-signing-global-compact-salvini\\_fde75c34-ea73-4358-bd17-df80c94e5c2d.html](http://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2018/11/28/italy-not-signing-global-compact-salvini_fde75c34-ea73-4358-bd17-df80c94e5c2d.html).

‡‡‡ May and Nölke (2018), among others, consider three main elements supporting the growing re-nationalization of multinational corporations started ten years ago: (1) rising costs to de-localise; (2) growing host country competition; (3) domestic politics. The last factor is particularly important when we deal with developed economies, as in times of economic crisis citizens increasingly demand their governments to support key corporations to remain at home, in order to keep their jobs (“pro-business” economic policies).

<b>Addressing Fears of citizens (i.e. Immigration)</b>	✓	
<b>Using Fears of citizens (i.e. Immigration)</b>	✓	
<b>Perception of distance from mainstream “classic” parties</b>	✓	
<b>Perception of focus on domestic level issues</b>	✓	
<b>Focus on Middle Class Voters</b>	✓	
<b>Focus on Working Class Voters</b>	✓	

### 3. Methodology

In order to answer the central question of this paper and examine the electoral fortunes of both populist radical right and left parties alike, we collected recent national parliamentary election data from recent legislative elections and cross-checked this with data from the ParlGov dataset (see Döring and Manow 2018). Our elections database contains data on parties’ electoral performances in national parliamentary elections across Europe, including the percentage of votes each party in each country won during parliamentary elections that are key to our analysis (see Appendix A).

These party performance data were then merged with the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) dataset on party positions. The CHES dataset is a widely used one and contains experts’ assessments of parties’ issue positions on a number of key European electoral issues. The CHES has a high degree of reliability and consistency in terms of the empirical measures (see Bakker et al. 2015) and allows us to examine party positions on immigration in the refugee crisis period.<sup>§§§</sup> In order to check the reliability of party families in our dataset, we matched and cross-checked our classifications with both ParlGov and the 2014 CHES database. Furthermore, Cas Mudde’s recent classifications (2014) of far-right parties also provided an additional reliability check.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> The full breakdown of party classifications and measurement can be found in the Appendices. The final sample size is comprised of 223 political parties across 28 countries in Western and Central-Eastern Europe.

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§§§ Although the refugee crisis began in 2015, we believe that the CHES 2014 data captures accurately party positions at the onset of the refugee crisis. Unfortunately, the CHES 2017 Expert Flash Survey cannot be used in the OLS regression models as there is a greatly reduced number of countries (N=14) under investigation and would limit the external validity of our paper.

\*\*\*\* For party families, we have coded each party on a 1-5 scale (1= radical left, 2= centre-left, 3= centrist, 4= centre-right and 5= radical right).

#### **4. Empirical Analysis**

The purpose of this article is to attempt to provide an answer to the central research question regarding “the key factors capable to explain the ability of European Radical Right parties to constantly outperform the Radical Left counterparts in terms of electoral success at the ballot box in the post-economic crisis period (2015-2018)”. The central argument we propose is based on what we defined as a double mechanism, used by Radical Right parties in Europe in order to be perceived as close to the People: (1) provoking and addressing fears and frustrations of citizens; (2) the use of a trivial and oversimplified account of the political reality. In addition, local issues have been the constant priority of the political agenda by Radical Right, in opposition with regional and international issues and in contrast with multilateral and top-down technocratic governance and policy-making.

We can now start analysing the empirical data to support our argument. Figure 1 depicts the percentage vote share change for different types of political parties in the last two national parliamentary elections across the European Union in 28-member states. Figure 1 demonstrates that in the last two national parliamentary elections that fall across the recent refugee crisis period, the Radical Right performed the best electorally. Mainstream centre-left parties performed the worst electorally and further depicts the electoral downfall of this party family in the post-economic crisis period and wider anti-incumbency effects. Whilst Radical Left parties performed well electorally, their electoral performance was considerably lower than Radical Right parties (see Downes and Chan, 2018).

Table 1 further demonstrates these patterns at the comparative level, with a strong electoral performance for Radical Right parties. Table 1 shows that Radical Right parties not only increased their seat share but achieved a high percentage vote share (11%) points which is not far behind that of centre-left parties (12%) and centre-right parties (14%). In contrast, the overall percentage vote share of Radical Left parties (8%) is considerably lower than that of the Radical Right. These aggregate level empirical findings also conceivably point to how the Radical Right and to a lesser extent the mainstream Centre-right are likely to be benefiting from playing up the immigration issue in their party strategies to voters (Downes and Loveless 2018).

Tables 2 and 3 provide a recent comparative and aggregate level electoral breakdown for Radical Right and Radical Left parties in national parliamentary elections. Table 2 demonstrates the electoral ‘rise’ of Radical Right parties across Europe, with the Radical Right performing particularly well in ten EU countries. In particular, the Radical Right has performed considerably well electorally from the ongoing refugee crisis context that has dominated recent national parliamentary elections (Downes and Wai 2018)<sup>††††</sup>. The 2017 Austrian, 2017 German and 2018 Italian legislative elections in particular demonstrate the ‘political earthquake’ that Radical Right parties have created in a number of European countries. The electoral success of the Radical Right should not be downplayed. The Radical Right did not just increase their vote and seat shares. Most significantly, the Austrian legislative election also saw the Freedom Party of Austria Freedom Party (FPÖ) entering into coalition with the centre-right Austrian People’s Party Freedom Party (ÖVP). At the same time, the landmark 2018 Italian legislative election saw two ‘populist’ parties, in particular the Radical Right League (Lega Nord) entering into coalition government with the Five Star Movement.<sup>††††</sup>

Table 3 demonstrates that a number of Radical Left parties did perform better electorally in national parliamentary elections. Notable cases include the Left Bloc (BE) in Portugal, Die Linke (The Left) in Germany, alongside the Party for the Animals (PvdD). At the same time, cases such as Syriza (36%) in Greece and Podemos (21%) in Spain show that the Radical Left has managed to achieve a high degree of electoral success in both countries (Downes, et al, 2018). For example, Podemos formed a leftist alliance with the former Communist Party (United Left) in June 2016, yet they failed to build on their momentum which earned them 21% of the total vote share in 2015.

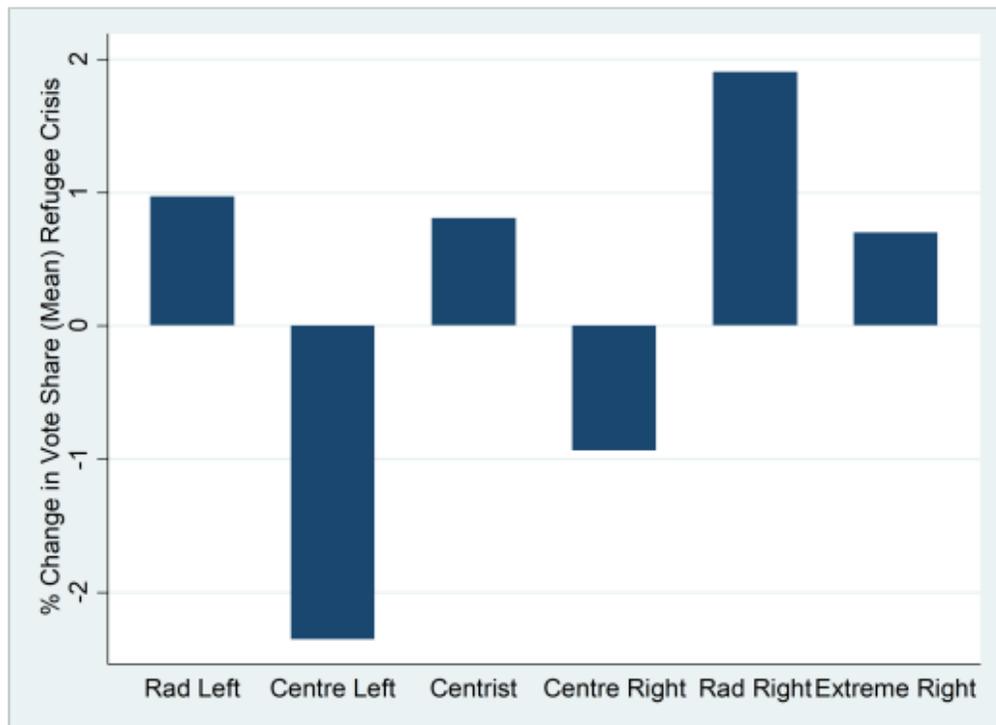
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†††† [http://euap.hkbu.edu.hk/main/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Briefing-paper-EU-refugee-Policy\\_-10-april-1.pdf](http://euap.hkbu.edu.hk/main/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Briefing-paper-EU-refugee-Policy_-10-april-1.pdf)

†††† The incumbent center right party Fidesz in Hungary (the 2018 Hungarian legislative election) is also an important case to refer to and has often been referred to as a ‘borderline’ case, with the party bearing ideological similarities to radical right parties, due to the party’s hardline stances on issues such as immigration and the ongoing refugee crisis. The case of Fidesz also highlights the how certain ‘types’ of center right parties may shift ideologically towards more radical right positions, in order to capture disaffected voters. Available at: <http://euap.hkbu.edu.hk/main/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Eelctoral-Volatility-in-the-2018-Hungarian-Election.pdf>

The newly formed alliance could not overtake the Socialist Party as the largest party among the left in Spain. Syriza suffered a hiccup in the snap election in September 2015, when their vote share declined, arguably as a result of accepting a new EU bail-out package. Nonetheless, they were still able to remain the incumbent party. However, it is important to note that electoral success for the Radical Left is not uniform, with some parties faring less well electorally and overall the Radical Left has not performed nearly as well as Radical Right parties have.

**Figure 1:** Percentage vote share change for different types of political parties (last two national parliamentary elections amongst the EU28) (Authors' own database)



**Table 4:** Party Family Electoral Performances (last two national parliamentary elections) in the post-crisis period (2013-2018) (Authors' own database)

<b>Party Family</b>	<b>Overall Vote Share (%)</b>	<b>Change in Vote Share (%)</b>	<b>Change in Seats (+/-)</b>	<b>Number of Parties (N)</b>
Radical Left	8	+0.4	+8	17
Centre-left	12	-3	-12	64
Centrist	9	+0.6	+2	29
Centre-right	14	-0.5	-3	74
Radical Right	11	+3	+17	30

**Table 5:** Recent Electoral Fortunes for Selected Radical Right Parties (last two national parliamentary elections) in the post-crisis period (Authors' own database)

<b>Country (Election Years)</b>	<b>Radical Right Party</b>	<b>% Overall Vote Share</b>	<b>% Change in Vote Share for Radical Right Parties (+/-)</b>	<b>Overall Change in Seat Share (+/-)</b>	<b>Electoral Success? (Yes/No)</b>
Austria (2013-2017)	Freedom Party (FPÖ)	26	+5.5	+11	Yes
Belgium (2010-2014)	Flemish Interest (VB)	3.7	-4.1	-9	No
Denmark (2011-2015)	Danish People's Party (DPP)	21.1	+8.8	+15	Yes
France (2012-2017)	Front National (FN)	1.4	+5.1	+6	Yes
Finland (2011-2015)	Finns (PS)	17.7	-1.4	-1	No
Germany (2013-2017)	Alternative for Germany (AfD)	12.6	+7.9	+94	Yes
Greece (Jan 2015-Sep 2015)	Golden Dawn (XA)	7	+0.7	+1	Yes

Hungary (2014-2018)	Jobbik	19.1	+1.16	+3	Yes
Italy (2013-2018)	League (LN)	17.6	+13.3	+104	Yes
The Netherlands (2012-2017)	Party for Freedom (PVV)	13.1	+3	+5	Yes
Poland (2011-2015)	Law and Justice (PiS)	37.6	+7.7	+101	Yes
Sweden (2010-2014)	Swedish Democrats (SD)	12.9	+7.16	+29	Yes
United Kingdom (2015-2017)	United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)	1.8	-10.8	-1	No

Notes: Electoral success means that a Radical Right party increased their vote share in the most recent national parliamentary. A selection of recent elections are presented for the sake of parsimony.

**Table 6:** Recent Electoral Fortunes for Selected Radical Left Parties (last two national parliamentary elections) in the post-crisis period (Authors' own database)

Country (Election Years)	Radical Left Party	% Overall Vote Share	% Change in Vote Share for Radical Left Parties (+/-)	Overall Change in Seat Share (+/-)	Electoral Success ? (Yes/No)
Finland (2011-2015)	Left Alliance (VAS)	7.1	-1	-2	No
Germany (2013-2017)	Die Linke (The Left)	9.2	+0.6	+5	Yes
Greece (Jan 2015-Sep 2015)	Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza)	35.5	-0.8	-4	No
The Netherlands (2012-2017)	Party for the Animals (PvdD)	3.2	+1.2	+3	Yes
Portugal (2011-2015)	Left Bloc (BE)	10.2	+5	+11	Yes
Portugal (2011-2015)	Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU)	8.3	+0.4	+1	Yes
Spain (2015-2016)	Unidos Podemos (Podemos-IU)	21.2	-3.3	0	No

Notes: Electoral success means that a Radical Left party increased their vote share in the most recent national parliamentary. A selection of recent elections are presented for the sake of parsimony.

## 5. Discussion

This paper has demonstrated the ability of populist radical right parties to take advantage of the refugee crisis (2015-2018) electoral period and perform better electorally than populist radical left parties. A number of important factors can arguably explain the electoral success of radical right parties in the post-economic crisis period and how they

have been able to capitalise from ‘populist’ elements and outperform their radical left counterparts. One of the key elements that lead radical right parties to perform considerably well electorally was their ability to provoke and amplify fears on identity politics and security. This is particularly clear in relation to the refugee crisis in Europe. A message appealing to simple and irrational feelings, evoking vivid images such as the “people”, the “nation”, the “land”, the “borders”, the “invasion”. Capitalising over these fears (see Bruno 2018) proved to be an electorally successful party strategy that targeted “immigrants”, the “capitalists”, “conspiracies” and technocrats. This is likely to have further boosted the radical right’s electoral fortunes.

The second element is the trivialisation of key socio-economic and political issues that arguably granted the radical right electoral success over their left-wing social democratic counterparts. This proved to be extremely successful against mainstream centre-left and to a lesser extent centre-right parties (see the cases of Italy, Hungary, Austria). Firstly, the party strategy of the radical right is simple and clear, in focusing on issues such as immigration and linking this directly to general discontent and dissatisfaction with the EU (i.e. protest politics). This is likely to have proved an electorally successful party strategy amongst voters. Secondly and linked to the key immigration issue, the radical right has a much broader voter base than the radical left. Recent research (Goodwin and Heath, 2016) has also shown that radical right parties have the ability to steal traditional working-class voters away from centre-left parties, primarily due to their effective use of the immigration issue.

The “accessibility” of the radical right parties’ simple political messages and their capacity to address rising citizens’ fears and frustrations arguably proved to be a key factor in outperforming the radical left, by appearing close to the people, through their anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric. In contrast, the radical left can still largely be seen as a platform for abstract intellectual debates, struggling to reduce political complexity to easy-to-access slogans and messages that are useful in our digital age. Furthermore, the case can be made that radical left parties may have been too similar ideologically, on key economic issues to social democratic parties (who suffered the most electorally in the post-economic crisis period).

Furthermore, the radical left's incapacity to produce practical political responses to the global economic crisis and to voters did not help their cause. In comparison to radical right parties, the radical left was not able to weave together a clear and simple narrative, for instance on economics and at the same time have not tended to focus on the key socio-cultural issue dimension of immigration that can reap electoral success. Thus, this is likely to have been a key reason why the radical left has not been able to achieve a decisive electoral breakthrough in the post-economic crisis period (2015-2018) as radical right parties have been able to.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is important to note that it is not possible to explain the radical right's effective use of populism, and its capacity to electorally outperform the radical left in Europe with a single factor. Instead, our central argument is multifaceted and includes the following: the triviality and accessibility of the political message of radical right parties, together with their capacity to instrumentally use fear. These strategies have granted them a high degree of electoral success in Europe across this electoral period. On the other hand, European radical left parties were arguably penalised by their proximity to mainstream centre-left parties. The shift to domestic level issues and the rejection of multilateral forms of governance also arguably proved to be an electorally successful strategy for the radical right in Europe. Future comparative research should seek to build on these aggregate level findings in further understanding the individual level, in examining the 'types' of voters that make up both radical right and left parties alike. At the same time, it is also important to quantitatively examine the different party positions of both party families on key socio-cultural and socio-economic issues. This would further allow important party competition comparisons to be made in twenty-first century European politics.

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