RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Radical Activation: Threats and the Psychological Roots of Populist Radical Right Support

They have been called deplorables. Authoritarians. Disagreeable people. Cynics. Academics and pundits alike have tried to characterize the supporters of populist radical right (PRR) parties in such personality terms. And indeed, recent studies have demonstrated that supporters of PRR parties share certain psychological characteristics. Most importantly, they tend to score low on Agreeableness and Openness to experience, and high on Authoritarianism. The discovery that PRR support has deep-lying psychological roots is an important one, because it helps us better understand the voter bases of the PRR, and, thereby, the curious upsurge of this party family.

Yet the discovery that PRR support is rooted in someone’s personality also presents us with an important puzzle. Personality traits represent strongly crystalized attitudes, behaviors and motivations that have been acquired early in life. They are, in other words, rather stable over time. The electoral successes of PRR parties, however, are highly volatile. How is that possible? How can something that does not change much (personality) explain something that changes all the time (PRR vote shares)?

By combining micro-level psychological explanations with macro-level perspectives from the fields of political science, sociology and communication science, this project introduces a new framework that focuses on the interplay between personal and environmental characteristics, and examines how the personality-PRR linkage gets activated. Specifically, my team and I will investigate to what extent different types of threats trigger certain personality traits, and make them consequential for PRR support, thereby mobilizing groups of PRR supporters that otherwise might not be mobilized.

By identifying how personality traits get activated and become consequential for PRR support, this project will make an important contribution to our understanding of the rising success of the PRR – one of the most challenging political changes in contemporary liberal democracies.

Personality traits and PRR support

PRR parties and politicians are increasingly successful. Think of Donald Trump in the US, Matteo Salvini’s Lega in Italy, and Geert Wilders’ Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands. A rich literature clarifies the content of the messages of these parties, the causes of their upsurge, the consequences of their successes and the sociodemographic and attitudinal profiles of their voter bases. Moreover, inspired by the seminal work of Adorno and colleagues, political psychologists have examined the extent to which PRR support is rooted in someone’s personality.

The psychological predispositions that matter most for PRR support are those traits that match well with the defining characteristics of PRR parties: their nativism (or, in other words, their exclusionary nationalism), and their populism (i.e., their positioning of the virtuous people against an evil elite). When it comes to populism, a trait that matches well is Agreeableness. Those who score low on Agreeableness tend to be egoistic, cynical, distrustful towards others, and susceptible to conspiracy theories. Such citizens can be expected to be sensitive to a populist message. With regard to nativism, congruent personality traits are, most importantly (but not exclusively), Openness to experience and Authoritarianism. Individuals low on Openness tend to be closed-minded and therefore dislike changes and new experiences, while those who score high on Authoritarianism highly value social order, structure and obedience. Such citizens can be expected to be susceptible to the message that out-groups like immigrants form a threat.

An integrated framework focusing on trait activation

How exactly do personality traits lead to PRR support? This research project proposes an innovative framework that integrates micro and macro perspectives and combines psychological theories with approaches from the fields of political science, sociology and communication science. As such, it employs an ‘interactionist’ perspective: what matters is not just someone’s personality, but the interaction or the interplay between personal and environmental characteristics. The core message is that “[w]hat people do depends both on who they are – their dispositions such as personality traits – and the situation they are in”.

Therefore, I argue that in order to understand the relationship between personality traits and PRR support, it is essential to assess the circumstances under which these traits get activated. Personality traits can for a long time lay dormant and become consequential for individuals’ political attitudes and behavior only once they get triggered. I propose that this happens in particular when people feel threatened. PRR parties distinguish themselves by
their nativist and populist messages.\textsuperscript{[18-19,34]} Therefore, in particular threats vis-à-vis ‘dangerous others’ (immigrants, refugees, Muslims) or corrupt elites can be expected to activate the personality-PRR linkage. Below I discuss the role of threats in more detail.

**Threats**

This project will make a distinction between: (1) ‘actual’ threats; (2) communicated threats; and (3) perceived threats. When it comes to ‘actual’ threats, this project will focus on levels of immigration and corruption, as the presence of immigrants and widespread corruption are considered among the most imminent threats by the nativist and populist worldviews, respectively.\textsuperscript{[18-19]} (Note that the word ‘actual’ here does not refer to whether the presence of immigrants and widespread corruption actually form a threat, but to the fact that these threats refer to identifiable societal conditions.) It has been shown that such threats can activate certain psychological predispositions. For instance, high levels of immigration can affect peoples’ attitudes about the issue of immigration, but this effect tends to be stronger among those who are already predisposed to anti-immigration messages.\textsuperscript{[35]}

Regarding communicated threats, the nativist and populist messages themselves play an essential role. Both types of messages can be seen as expressions of out-group derogation.\textsuperscript{[36]} When it comes to nativism the out-group consists of non-natives and vis-à-vis populism it is the corrupt political elite. We know that such messages matter for the relation between personality and voting behaviour. In a recent study my co-authors and I have found that expressing threatening anti-elite messages makes politicians more attractive among those who, based on their personality traits, can already be expected to be susceptible to such messages.\textsuperscript{[4]}

Finally, it might well be that what matters most are not actual or communicated threats, but the extent to which individuals perceive a threat. “Perceived threats have real consequences, regardless of whether or not the perceptions of threat are accurate.”\textsuperscript{[37]} In fact, many studies that examine the effects of threats – also when it comes, specifically, to their activation potential – actually focus on a person’s perceptions of threat.\textsuperscript{[33]}

According to Intergroup Threat Theory,\textsuperscript{[38-39]} threats can be separated into group-level threats and individual-level threats. Because both nativism and populism focus on groups, it is likely that in particular group-level threats matter to a given person’s or community’s PRR support. Indeed, it has been shown that when it comes to anti-immigration attitudes it is mostly the group-level threats that matter.\textsuperscript{[40]}

By distinguishing these different types of threat and by investigating the relationships between them, this project makes important contributions to the literatures on threats, the activation of personality traits, and the PRR.

**Methods and techniques**

In this section I discuss the research design and methodology. I will focus on Western cases because in these countries the rise of the PRR has been very outspoken, and because for many of these countries high quality datasets including information on both personality traits and voting behavior are available.

**Threats**

To investigate how threats and threat perceptions activate personality traits my team and I will combine and examine existing observational datasets (WP1A) and we will conduct two survey experiments (WP1B).

**Observational data.** The biggest advantage of using observational data is that they – as long as they are based on high quality samples – make it possible to generalize findings to the wider population. Because datasets containing information about both personality traits and voting behavior are relatively scarce, we shall compile our own comparative dataset, based on various existing national-level surveys. For a previous study, my co-authors and I have already combined various datasets.\textsuperscript{[41]} We will expand this dataset further. The countries for which I already have collected appropriate datasets are: Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the US.

We will examine the moderating effect of ‘actual’ threats by linking these data to information on levels of immigration and corruption (coming from sources like the World Bank and Transparency international). We will measure perceived threats by means of individual-level variables that tap into political distrust or anti-immigration attitudes. We will link all this information to data coming from the PopuList – an overview of all relevant PRR
parties in Europe, of which I am the initiator. [63] I have ample experience analyzing such macro-level and micro-level observational data.

Survey experiments. An important disadvantage of observational studies is that they are essentially correlational – i.e., it is very difficult to establish cause-effect relationships. For this reason we will supplement the observational studies with survey experiments. These two designs nicely complement each other because they bring together external and internal validity. Because of budgetary reasons, we cannot run these experiments in all countries investigated in the observational studies, so we need to make a selection. This selection is based on how successful PRR parties are. PRR parties are, or have recently been, highly successful in Italy (Lega), moderately successful in the Netherlands (PVV and FVD) and Austria (FPÖ), and (still) relatively unsuccessful in Portugal (Chega). Hence, we will conduct the experiments in these four countries. The samples will be drawn by public opinion agencies, and we will aim for samples that are representative for the four national populations.

In the first experiment we focus on communicated and perceived threats. Respondents will first answer questions about their socio-demographic background and their personalities. The treatment is a short newspaper article consisting of a nativist and/or populist message. There are four conditions: (1) a populist threat; (2) a nativist threat; (3) a populist and a nativist threat; and (4) a control condition. My experience with such survey experiments suggests that the treatments must be strong in order to be effective. [36] We will therefore present the treatment as an op-ed article with a very strong negative opinion about the elite and/or immigrants. After the treatment, respondents will answer threat perception questions. The first set of dependent variables consist of items measuring the probability to vote (PTV) for fictitious parties (among them parties that are strongly nativist or populist, based on a brief description). Second, we will ask their PTV for existing parties – including the national PRR party. We will assess the interaction between personality and the message the respondent is exposed to and its effect on party support.

In the second experiment we focus on ‘actual’ and perceived threats. We will manipulate ‘actual’ threats by letting respondents read (fictitious) newspaper articles about the levels of immigration and/or corruption in their country. This will lead to 7 experimental conditions: (1) high immigration; (2) low immigration; (3) high corruption; (4) low corruption; (5) both high immigration and corruption; (6) both low immigration and corruption; (7) a control condition. The rest of the experimental design will match the first survey experiment.

In both experiments we will also examine the relationships between ‘actual’, communicated and perceived threats. I have substantial experience conducting survey experiments.

Literature references


