


# Avoiding the mainstream: Why radical right-wing populist parties remain 'radical' in government

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/08/23/avoiding-the-mainstream-why-radical-right-wing-populist-parties-remain-radical-in-governm](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/08/23/avoiding-the-mainstream-why-radical-right-wing-populist-parties-remain-radical-in-governm)

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*Radical right-wing populist parties have experienced a growth in support in several European countries over the last 15 years, but how do such parties adapt to power when they enter government? [Tjitske Akkerman](#), [Sarah de Lange](#) and [Matthijs Rooduijn](#) write that although radical right-wing populist parties do become more mainstream in some respects when they enter office, this is largely only true in a procedural sense, with their policy platforms quickly becoming just as radical as before when they go back into opposition.*



Radical right-wing populist parties are an increasingly important factor almost everywhere in western Europe. On average, the electoral support for these parties in national elections has grown by 4.5 percentage points since the 1990s. Moreover, many radical right-wing populist parties, such as the [Freedom Party of Austria](#) (FPÖ) and Italy's [Lega Nord](#) (LN), have participated in government coalitions. Others, such as the [Danish People's Party](#) (DF) and the Dutch [Party for Freedom](#) (PVV), have been supporters of minority cabinets and have as such been part of a governing coalition. When the current cabinets in Finland and Norway are included, radical right-wing populist parties have participated in no less than 16 government coalitions since the turn of the century.



It can be expected that experience in government induces radical right-wing populist parties to shift toward the mainstream. Being in office in western Europe almost always entails being part of a coalition with one or more mainstream parties and therefore will pressure parties to compromise. It is also more difficult for parties to position themselves as outsiders and opponents of the establishment, an essential trait of radical right-wing populist parties. Indeed, previous research shows that other new party families, like the greens or religious parties, become more mainstream when they prepare to assume government responsibility. There are no reasons to suppose that this will be different for radical right-wing populist parties.



Yet, we find that radical right-wing populist parties generally do not mainstream when they govern. Based on quantitative comparative analyses and on a wide range of qualitative case studies, our [recent book](#) demonstrates that governing radical right-wing populist parties hardly compromise on core issues, such as immigration and Islam, law and order, or European integration. Moreover, we observe that they maintain a niche profile, only marginally broadening their focus to socioeconomic issues.

Furthermore, we found that radical right-wing populist parties do not tone down their populist rhetoric when in office. The only important mainstreaming effect that can be observed is behavioural. We find that most radical right-wing populist parties become less populist in terms of their parliamentary behaviour. More specifically, they behave as trustworthy partners in the coalitions they form and follow the rules of the political game. However, this effect is temporary, and the parties we assessed 'radicalised' when returning to the opposition benches.

## The case of the Freedom Party of Austria

The case of the FPÖ, one of the first radical right-wing populist parties to enter a national government in 2000, illustrates these findings. At first glance, the party seemed to mainstream after assuming office. It met the demands of the conservative coalition partner, the ÖVP, in order to gain national office, such as abandoning its stances on plebiscitarian democracy and European integration, and distancing itself from associations with Nazism. Moreover, with respect to immigration and integration policy, the new cabinet did not deviate much from previous cabinets.

When the government coalition assumed office in 2000, ÖVP-leader Schüssel had declared that 'he would tame the dragon' and initially the FPÖ indeed seemed to be 'tamed'.

However, in government, tensions quickly developed within the FPÖ due to the pressures of slumping support in the polls and discontent over the party strategy among the rank and file. As a result, the party split shortly after it had assumed office for a second time in 2005, with a new party, the [Alliance for the Future of Austria](#) (BZÖ) staying in the government, while the breakaway FPÖ returned to the opposition benches.

Once in opposition, the FPÖ soon radicalised again to regain support among voters disaffected with government policies. Its new leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, ferociously attacked the government's EU and immigration policies, accusing the EU of corruption and of being seized by 'asylum craziness'. In the subsequent elections, the FPÖ fared much better than the BZÖ. After the next Austrian elections, which are scheduled to be held before October 2018, it even is likely the FPÖ will become the largest party in the country. However, it is unlikely the FPÖ will repeat history and adapt to the demands of its eventual partner(s), as it has learned that it pays to give priority to votes rather than office.



Heinz-Christian Strache, Credit: Metropolico.org (CC-BY-SA-2.0)

### **Avoiding the mainstream**

In sum, we find that radical right-wing populist parties do not mainstream when preparing for office. They have learned that watering down their radical right-wing populist profile is electorally costly and they therefore refrain from mainstreaming. Only when it comes to their populist behaviour does government participation have an impact. While populist rhetoric thrives when radical right-wing populist parties are in office, they do not act accordingly when they have government responsibility.

The DF and the PVV, for instance, demonstrated from the beginning that they were trustworthy partners to the minority cabinet they were supporting. The DF supported the government budget every year and seldom opposed government bills. The party has become quite 'housetrained' in this respect, a qualification that is illustrated by the fact that even the Social Democrats supported the election of former DF-leader Kjaersgaard as Speaker of Parliament.

Of course, there are also exceptions to these general rules. The [Finns Party](#) in Finland, for instance, made concessions with respect to its Euroscepticism by accepting the Greek bailout when it assumed office in 2015. Yet most parties have found ways to minimize compromising on their core issues, like immigration and integration, law and order and European integration when concluding coalition agreements. An important way through which they have achieved this objective is by logrolling over policy. In exchange for concessions on immigration and integration policies, for instance, radical right-wing populist parties accept the socioeconomic reforms their partners want to implement.

The DF engaged in this strategy most successfully, thereby fundamentally reshaping immigration and integration legislation in Denmark. Another way to maintain a radical right-wing populist profile is through the inclusion of 'agreements to disagree' in the coalition agreement. The DF and the PVV protected the possibility to campaign on their anti-Islam positions by excluding this issue from the coalition agreement. Lastly, forms of direct democracy are

also exploited to maintain a radical right-wing populist profile when in government. The [Swiss People's Party \(SVP\)](#) in particular has demonstrated how popular initiatives and referendums can be used to circumvent constraints of office in this respect.

In sum, radical right-wing populist parties do what they can to maintain their profitable profile and thereby maintain voter support when in office. With the help of the strategies described above they manage quite well to stay away from the mainstream and to keep a radical right-wing populist profile, even when confronted with the responsibilities that come with governing.

*For a more detailed account of the research project, see the authors' book [Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe. Into the Mainstream?](#) (London: Routledge, 2016)*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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