

Do populist parties really boost turnout at elections?

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The presence and popularity of populist parties – right-wing in the US, radical right in the EU – raises significant questions about their consequences for democracy, democratic legitimacy, and political participation. [Tim Immerzeel](#) and [Mark Pickup](#) examine the role of these parties for a specific indicator of the quality of democracy: voter turnout. Based on an analysis of 33 European countries in the period 2002-2012, they show that the presence and popularity attracts some people to the polling booth, while demotivating others.



The rise of the populist radical right in European democracies over the last three decades has attracted extensive scientific and public debate. One focal point concerns the consequences of the populist radical right for democracy. Some have claimed that the populist radical right constitutes a serious threat to democracy because its leaders employ a radical notion of democracy that emphasises a homogenous ‘people’ and excludes minorities. However, others have noted that the populist radical right actually correct democratic deficiencies by speaking to a large group of citizens disillusioned with mainstream politicians and parties. These people, who feel that there is finally someone who listens to their grievances, may find the way (back) to the polling booth, thus boosting general turnout numbers (cf. [Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012](#)).



Although the question of whether the populist radical right constitutes a ‘threat or corrective’ to democracy is usually a normative one, the question of whether there is a relationship between the popularity of the populist radical right and voter turnout can be empirically tested. Does the populist radical right, indeed, play a role in encouraging or discouraging citizens to go to the polling booth, and why? In our recent study, we address this question. Drawing upon different theories, such as electoral competition ([Franklin, 2004](#)), we expect that a successful populist radical right party fosters voter turnout because it is a passionate mobiliser that fulfils a watchdog function and reintroduces electoral competition. Additionally, we argue that the populist radical right will be especially successful in doing so among those who favour populist radical right policies: the less educated, the blue-collar workers, the unemployed,

the politically dissatisfied, and those with negative attitudes toward immigrants. In addition, we develop a competing hypothesis that the populist radical right could inhibit voter turnout because it introduces a more negative, hardened tone to the political debate that further triggers distrust toward politics, politicians and democracy. We expect that this will especially discourage those who are new to democracy: whether it is young voters in more established democracies, or Eastern Europeans.

Most importantly, our study shows that there is no general positive influence of the populist radical right's popularity on electoral turnout. Despite the unique profile of the populist radical right as a populist, nativist contender and some anecdotal evidence that the populist radical right's electoral breakthroughs accompany rising turnout, these parties do not have the general positive impact on electoral turnout that we had expected. In Western European countries, the populist radical right generally has no influence on electoral turnout, whereas in Eastern European countries it has a negative effect. Hence, to speak of the populist radical right as 'corrective of democracy' is—in terms of electoral turnout—a misunderstanding.

Yet, although the populist radical right does not have a generally positive influence on electoral turnout, the Western European populist radical right do encourage some social groups to turn out for national elections. These groups are, however, not the people who agree with the populist radical right's ideology. Rather, they seem to be the groups that are actually repelled by them: the more highly educated Western Europeans who are more politically interested are more inclined to 'keep the rascals out'.

Interestingly, in Eastern Europe, such positive effects on electoral turnout for those who oppose populist radical right ideology were not found. In contrast, anti-populist radical right Eastern Europeans were actually strongly discouraged from voting with increasing populist radical right popularity. Younger, more highly educated, non-blue collar workers and politically interested citizens were more inclined to stay home at national election time when the populist radical right became more popular.

We speculate that these East-West differences may be caused by the fact that Eastern Europeans live in younger democracies and have less experience with electoral competition than their Western European counterparts. Anti-populist radical right Western Europeans are often socialised in a democratic regime where elections are accompanied by contentious political campaigns. They may think of elections as a legitimate method of 'protest' against the populist radical right and thus turn out to vote (cf. [Hirschman, 1970](#); [Thomassen et al., 2014](#)), whereas anti-populist radical right Eastern Europeans may interpret the populist radical right's success as a confirmation of their image of democracy, politics and politicians as being untrustworthy and corrupt. This results in lower levels of electoral turnout ([Brooks & Geer, 2007](#); [Kahn & Kenney, 1999](#)).

Altogether, our findings underline the claim that the populist radical right poses a threat to democracy especially in East-European countries where young people in particular are negatively affected by the success of the populist radical right. If young people do not vote, their interests may be underrepresented in the legislature, and they will be more likely to become habitual non-voters (e.g. [Plutzer, 2002](#)). In the short-term, this leads to lower levels of turnout among youngsters. In the long-term, this younger generation could pass down their habitual nonvoting to the next generation, which eventually leads to even lower levels of turnout across the electorate (cf. [Blais & Rubenson, 2013](#)). Hence, we conclude that for Eastern Europe, one should be concerned about the popularity of the populist radical right because it seems to discourage an important part of the electorate from turning out at elections.

Note: This blog is based on the authors' recent [Electoral Studies article](#) "Populist radical right parties mobilizing 'the people'? The role of populist radical right success in voter turnout". It was originally posted on [Democratic Audit](#).

About the Authors

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Mark Pickup is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Simon Fraser University. He has taught time series analysis at the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research Summer Training Program since 2010. He is a specialist in comparative politics and political methodology. Substantively, his research primarily falls into three areas: (1) the economy and democratic accountability, (2) polls and electoral outcomes, and (3) conditions of democratic responsiveness. He holds degrees in chemical physics (BSc) and political science (BA, MA, and PhD). He received his doctoral degree at the University of British Columbia. In addition to his current position at Simon Fraser University, he has been a Lecturer at the University of Nottingham and a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Oxford.



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