

How scholars turned their attention to the populist radical right

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By Democratic Audit UK

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In this extract from his new book, [The Populist Radical Right: A Reader](#), **Cas Mudde** looks at the boom in academic studies of populist radical right parties. He identifies three waves of scholarship since 1945 – the most recent of which has come to trump the study of all other party families put together, despite their relative lack of electoral success.



A Front National rally, 2012. Photo: [Blandine Le Cain](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

Populist radical right parties are the most studied party family in political science. Hardly a month goes by without a new article or book on a populist radical right party or the populist radical right party family. No less than ten articles were published (primarily) on the populist radical right in the first two months of 2016 alone! In the same period, no articles were published on the three major party families of European politics – the Christian democrats, social democrats, and liberals – while two articles were published on ‘radical left’ parties, a party family that was recently brought back from the dead by the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) in Greece and We Can (Podemos) in Spain.

This disproportionate focus is nothing new. Ever since the rise of populist radical right parties started in the mid-1980s, the party family has inspired an ever-growing coterie industry of scholars that tries to satisfy the never-ending desire for information that exists among various publics. One of the consequences of this ballooning of scholarship is that, at least since the early 1990s, there are more academic studies of populist radical right parties than of all other party families *combined* (see figure 1). In fact, in certain years (e.g. 2010) there were almost *seven times* as many articles on populist radical right parties than on all other party families together.

While the increase in studies of populist radical right parties reflects, at least to some extent, the rise in the electoral success of the party family, the emphasis remains highly disproportional. Even in the early 21st century the populist radical right is at best the fourth-largest party family in Europe, in terms of electoral support – behind the three party families mentioned before – and possibly only the fifth-most relevant in terms of political relevance, given that the Greens still have more coalition potential in most (West) European countries.

Three waves of scholarship

Just as Klaus von Beyme famously distinguished between three chronologically and ideologically different waves of right-wing extremism in postwar Europe, we can differentiate between three academically distinct waves of scholarship of populist radical right parties since 1945. The three waves do not just follow each other chronologically, but also reflect different types of scholarship in terms of the questions they ask and terms they use. Obviously, the distinction is imprecise and functions mostly as a heuristic tool to structure the voluminous scholarship. None of the three waves is homogenous and heated debates about definitions and interpretations have always dominated the field.

The **first wave lasted roughly from 1945 till 1980, was mostly historical and descriptive, and focused primarily on the historical continuity between the pre-war and post-war periods.** The majority of the (few) scholars were historians, experts of historical fascism, who studied the postwar populist radical right under the headings of 'extreme right' and 'neo-fascism.' The bulk of this, still rather limited, scholarship was published in other languages than English, most notably German and French.

The **second wave of scholarship lasted roughly from 1980 to 2000,** although it only really took off with the start of the third wave of the 'extreme right' in Europe in the mid-1980s. This wave saw an infusion of social science literature, in particular various forms of modernisation theories, and was, directly or indirectly, influenced by American studies of the 'radical right' of the previous decades. In line with the influential 'normal pathology' thesis, scholars tried to understand why 'radical right' parties could be successful in modern western democracies. Focusing on a small subset of parties in Western Europe – the usual suspects like the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the French National Front (FN), and the German Republicans (REP) – scholars almost exclusively studied the demand-side of populist radical right politics, treating the populist radical right party as the dependent variable.

The **third wave of scholarship** took off at the turn of the century, as scholars started to focus more on **the supply-side of populist radical right politics, including the parties themselves.** Scholars no longer only tried to explain their electoral successes (and, to a much lesser extent, failures), but started to investigate their effects as well. Consequently, the populist radical right party was now studied as both a dependent and independent variable. The field also became part of mainstream social science, and particularly political science, which led to further integration of mainstream theories and methods into the study of the populist radical right. Under a broad plethora of terms, though mostly including some combination of 'right' and 'populism,' scholarship of populist radical right parties now trumped that of all other party families together. It also influenced scholarship on related phenomena, from 'niche' parties to the 'radical left.'

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It is an extract from [The Populist Radical Right: A Reader](#), published by Routledge.

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