

How mainstream parties react to the rise of radical right-wing parties

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*Across Europe, the far-right has surged over recent years, as dissatisfaction with politics and the political class combines with anti-immigrant sentiment. But how do mainstream political parties – who are so frequently at the receiving end of the ire of these political movements – respond? **Kyung Joon Han** describes an often complicated relationship between the mainstream and political periphery.*



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Radical right-wing parties (RRPs) have become a major political player in many Western European countries. Even the Sweden Democrats, one of the least successful RRP in Western Europe, earned 12.9 percent of the vote in 2014 – a more than 50 percent increase since the last national election in 2010, and good enough to become the third largest political party in Sweden.

What are the policy and political impacts of the electoral rise of RRP? The direct policy impact of these parties is difficult to determine, as RRP have rarely participated in governing coalitions until very recently. Infrequent observation of direct impacts, however, does not mean that RRP have had insignificant (or longstanding) indirect impacts. In particular, RRP may matter indirectly if the ideologies, stances, and/or policy preferences of traditional mainstream parties – which are nearly always in governing coalitions and thus able to implement their “preferred” policies – are influenced by RRP.

Indeed, the conventional wisdom in scholarship on party competition is that RRP pressure mainstream parties to adopt more restrictive positions on those issues RRP mobilize voters on – namely, issues related to immigration. The argument is that right-wing mainstream parties adopt RRP policy positions in an effort to expand support in the wider electorate and build a large and lasting right-wing block, while other left-wing and centrist mainstream parties adopt RRP policy positions in order to maintain support among their traditional constituencies – constituencies that

may be attracted to the strong and uncompromising positions of the RRP. In other words, the conventional explanation argues that mainstream parties of all ideological persuasions respond to RRP electoral success in the same way – by adopting RRP-like positions.

These conventional expectations tend to downplay the importance of the ideology of politicians and the constituencies that they represent as well as the role that non-policy factors – such as credibility – play in determining voter support. In a paper recently published in *West European Politics*, I take these matters into account and provide empirical results that run counter to the conventional wisdom. I find that right-wing mainstream parties adjust their stances to RRP electoral success relatively easily, quickly adopting more restrictive stances regarding multiculturalism (i.e., party stances that discourage the coexistence of distinct cultures and preservation of the religious and linguistic autonomy of ethnic minorities) when RRPs increased their vote share in the previous election.

However, under the same electoral conditions, left-wing mainstream parties are much more resistant to shifting their stances on multiculturalism. These mainstream parties are found to switch their stances in response to an increase in RRP vote share only when core party supporters begin to have a more negative view of foreigners, or when the left-wing mainstream parties lost more votes in the past election than their main right-wing mainstream opponents. I argue that there are both ideological and practical reasons for this finding. Ideologically, left-wing politicians have cosmopolitan views and strong commitment to multiculturalism, and thus are not terribly eager to switch to a more restrictive position on immigration-related issues such as multiculturalism. Practically, left-wing politicians may lose votes by adopting more restrictive stances on multiculturalism – either among “swing voters”, who know this is not a position based on conviction but rather political expediency, or among core supporters, who tend to be strong supporters of multiculturalism (and may even be multicultural themselves).

Both the conventional wisdom and my own findings demonstrate that the political and policy impacts of RRPs should not be underestimated. Because RRPs rarely participate in governing coalitions, it may be assumed that the policy impacts of these parties are negligible or even nonexistent. Yet RRPs can achieve their policy aims by pressuring or incentivizing other, mainstream parties that do participate in governing coalitions to adopt their preferred policy positions. Indeed, under certain conditions, the policy outputs of any government – be it left-wing, centrist, or right-wing – will reflect the preferences of RRPs.

Unlike the conventional wisdom, however, my finding implies that partisanship still very much matters. For both ideological and practical reasons, left-wing mainstream parties are more reluctant to adopt restrictive positions regarding multiculturalism as a response to electoral gains by RRPs. Although left-wing mainstream parties have often been criticized for shedding their more inclusive positions of the past and adopting more restrictive positions on immigration-related issues, it should be recognized that a relatively high political threshold must be reached before such position shifts occur.

Future research should explore whether shifts in the positions of mainstream parties have a feedback effect on RRPs. One plausible scenario is that the RRP voters move their support (back) to mainstream parties after the latter promote or implement more restrictive immigration policies. If so, current RRP electoral success may help further their nativist agenda, while at the same time sowing the seeds of their party's future organizational decline.

Another possible, but opposite, expectation is that the mainstream parties' adoption of more restrictive positions regarding immigration and multiculturalism increases the salience of immigration-related issues and approve the political agendas on immigration set by RRPs, allowing RRPs to mobilize further on such issues and gain more electoral achievement. If this is the case, the “accommodative strategy” of mainstream parties (i.e., adopting the issue stances of RRPs) may not only fail to achieve its goal of pre-empting or reversing the electoral rise of RRPs, but may also eventually lead to a role reversal – RRPs as major players in governing coalitions and “mainstream” parties attempting to influence policy indirectly from the outside.

The citation for the full study is: Han, Kyung Joon. 2014. [“The Impact of Radical Right-Wing Parties on the Positions of Mainstream Parties Regarding Multiculturalism”](#) *West European Politics* 38 (3): 557-576. This post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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