

Following the leader or following your ideology? The case of Populist Radical Right Voting

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Abstract

Voting for a populist radical right (PRR) party has been attributed to four attitudes; right-wing ideology, anti-immigrant attitudes, political cynicism and sympathy towards the party leader. In this study we demonstrate that the causal arrow can also be reversed: voters change their attitudes *after* they voted for a PRR party because they want to reduce the cognitive dissonance they experience. We show that in the Netherlands voters change their left-right positions and leader sympathy after they voted to the PRR Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV). Anti-immigrant attitudes and political cynicism, however, are not affected by voting for a PRR party. This implies that attitudes not only influence the choice for a PRR party, but that the act of voting for such a party also influences citizens' attitudes again.

Keywords: Voting, Cognitive Dissonance, Populist Radical Right Parties

Some portray voting for the populist radical right (PRR) as pathological because these voters support parties that hold values that “are alien to western democratic values” (for a summary see, Mudde 2010, 1170). Voters support these parties because of “anger and frustration” with politics or an “irrational bond” with a politician (Mudde 2010, 1170). Indeed, empirical studies find that political cynicism (Bergh 2004; Mayer and Perrineau 1992; Oesch 2008; Bélanger and Aarts 2006; Swyngedouw 2001) or the charisma of the party leader (Van Holsteyn and Andeweg 2010; Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013) explain why voters support PRR parties. For others however, PRR parties are not the antithesis of democracy, but simply more radical versions of mainstream parties (Mudde 2010). In line with this standpoint, PRR voters are motivated by issues, not by pathologies. Indeed, other empirical studies find that voting for a PRR party conforms to voting for any other party, as PRR voters match with PRR parties in terms of left-right preferences (van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie 2000; van der Brug and Fennema 2007; van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie 2005). Policy preferences regarding immigration are a second-best predictor (van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie 2000; Arzheimer 2009; Ivarsflaten 2008).¹

Unfortunately, these associations are based on cross-sectional analyses of voter attitudes and vote choice. As such, they cannot determine whether these attitudes (i.e., political cynicism,

¹ Another research agenda explores the correlations between socio-economic background variables and radical right voting (Arzheimer 2009; Lubbers, Gijsberts, and Scheepers 2002). We study change in attitudes, and factors such as gender, age and education cannot change as a consequence of vote choice. Accordingly, these variables are beyond the scope of our study.

leader sympathy, left-right position, immigration attitude) *cause* voting for a PRR party or whether they are a *consequence* of it.

Voting for a party is not only an *outcome* of adhering to certain attitudes. The act of voting for a party also affects these attitudes again. For instance, based on panel studies in different countries and covering different elections, Lenz (2012) concludes that voters first choose the politician they like and only later move to support the party and concomitant policy attitudes. Using a structural equation model, Van der Brug (2003) demonstrates that it is more likely that voting for the List Pim Fortuyn (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*, LPF, a PRR party in the Netherlands between 2002-2006) fueled political distrust rather than that political distrust caused voting for the LPF.

These findings can be interpreted within the cognitive dissonance framework (Festinger 1957; Kunda 1990; Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2015). People prefer to be consistent in their actions and attitudes, and if there is dissonance between the two, individuals tend to align them (Festinger 1957). Taking actions that are inconsistent with one's attitudes conflicts with one's self-image as decent and intelligent (Kunda 1990). Thus, attitudes not only influence voting; attitudes are also shaped by voting (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2015). Indeed, cognitive dissonance has been shown to explain the effect of vote choice on core values (McCann 1997), party identification (Dinas 2014), economic evaluations (Anderson, Mendes, and Tverdova 2004), evaluations of the party (Bølstad, Dinas, and Riera 2013) and evaluations of the party leader (Mullainathan and Washington 2009; Beasley and Joslyn 2001).

This paper analyzes whether PRR voting *causes* changes in political cynicism, leader sympathy, left-right position and immigration attitude. To answer this question we follow voters

over time, specifically before and after they choose to vote for a PRR party for the first time. We analyze first-time PRR voters, because they are more likely than habitual PRR voters to experience dissonance between voting for a PRR party and their attitudes. We use Dutch panel data from the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Science (LISS) panel (2006-2011) which covers all four attitudes and, moreover, includes elections in which a significant PRR party (the Dutch Freedom Party) participated. The panel structure provides us with a unique opportunity to utilize fixed-effects panel regression models in order to estimate the *causal* effect of voting for a PRR party on attitudes (Angrist and Pischke 2009; Winship and Morgan 1999). With this design we are better able to identify whether PRR voting is a “pathology” motivated by cynicism and leader charisma or “normal” political behavior motivated by policy demands.

Method

Dutch Freedom Party

We analyze the vote intention for the Dutch PVV for two main reasons. First, it is a very successful PRR party. The party participated for the first time in the 2006 national elections and received about 6% of the seats. In the 2010 elections, the party increased its seat share to 16%. Second, there are many citizens who voted for the PVV in 2010 but not in 2006. This provides us with many first-time PVV voters and makes this an excellent case for our study.

Participants

The data in this study come from the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Science (LISS) panel. The LISS panel is a high quality internet panel survey that asks participants on a regular

basis about their political preferences in the period 2007-2011. The panel started in the fall of 2007 when, based upon a probability sample of the Dutch population, over 8,000 participants were recruited in nearly 5,000 households (Scherpenzeel and Das 2010). We created a sample of respondents that provided answers on each of the *Politics and Values* surveys conducted in December of each year as well as the 2010 Dutch Election Studies (see Table 1). Due to missing values on the dependent variables, our sample ranges from 2,400 through 3,000 respondents.

Table 1 Panel Structure

Construct	Measured	LISS panel module
<i>Vote choice in 2006</i>	December 2007	Politics and Values
Attitudes 2008	December 2008	Politics and Values
Attitudes 2009	December 2009	Politics and Values
<i>Vote choice 2010</i>	June 2010	Dutch National Election Survey
Attitudes 2010	December 2010	Politics and Values

Measures

We create a variable that captures whether participants voted for the PVV in 2010 for the first time. In order to do so, we rely upon the self-reported vote choice during the 2006 parliamentary elections which was asked as part of the 2007 *Personality and Values* survey fielded among LISS panel members. In May 2010 the next parliamentary elections were held. The Dutch National Elections Survey was fielded among LISS panel members. Accordingly, we have a measure of the self-reported vote choice directly after the 2010 elections. Based upon these self-reported vote choices we created an index which captures participants voting behavior in 2006 and 2010.

We analyze the general left-right position, the attitude toward immigrants, political cynicism, and sympathy for the leader, Geert Wilders. These variables were assessed in the

exact same formulations in each wave of the survey. *Left-right position* was measured using the item “Where would you place yourself on the scale below, where 0 means left and 10 means right?”. *Attitudes towards immigrants* were measured using five items such as “There are too many people of foreign origin or descent in the Netherlands”.² Participants answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “fully disagree” (1) through “fully agree” (5). The immigration attitude dimension was internally consistent in 2007 ($\alpha=0.78$), 2008 ($\alpha=0.79$), 2009 ($\alpha=0.79$), 2010 ($\alpha=0.79$) and 2011 ($\alpha=0.79$). We have recoded this scale so that it ranges from pro-immigration (0) to anti-immigration (10). *Political cynicism* was measured using three items, such as “Parliamentarians do not care about the opinions of people like me”.³ All three items were scored with the answer categories “that is true” versus “that is not true”. We created an additive scale that ranges from not cynical (0) through cynical (10). The cynicism dimension was internally consistent in 2007 ($\alpha=0.75$), 2008 ($\alpha=0.77$), 2009 ($\alpha=0.77$), 2010 ($\alpha=0.76$) and 2011 ($\alpha=0.77$). Lastly, *Sympathy for Geert Wilders* was assessed using an item asking participants “What do you think of Geert Wilders?”, which participants answered on a scale ranging from “very unsympathetic” (0) through “very sympathetic” (10).

² The other items were: “It is good if society consists of people from different cultures”; “It should be made easier to obtain asylum in the Netherlands”; “Legally residing foreigners should be entitled to the same social security as Dutch citizens” and “It is difficult for a foreigner to be accepted in the Netherlands while retaining his/her culture”

³ The other two items were: “Political parties are only interested in my vote and not in my opinion” and “People like me have not influence at all on government policy.”

Identification strategy

In order to test whether voting for a PRR party *causes* attitude change, we have to account for unobserved confounders (Angrist and Pischke 2009; Winship and Morgan 1999). We utilize the panel dataset because we have observations of voters' attitudes before and after they switched towards the PVV. Specifically, we employ a fixed-effect regression model which according to Winship and Morgan (1999, 696) offers a "simple method for estimating the causal effects". Our design closely resembles the design employed by Freeman (1984), who used fixed-effect regression models to show that joining a union caused a change in wage. Instead of joining a union, we estimate the effect of switching towards the PVV on political attitudes. We estimate our models using equation 1.

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{VotePRR}_i + \lambda_i + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

In this model Y_{it} measures the attitudinal change $Y_{it} - Y_{it-1}$. VotePRR_i is a dichotomous indicator which captures whether voters switched to the PVV in 2010 compared to all other voters. ε_{it} is the error term for each individual whereby i is uncorrelated with the error term across time. λ_i is the fixed effect for the individual. This implies that all time-invariant differences between respondents are subsumed in λ_i . In doing so, we assume that we control for all unmeasured stable confounders (Winship and Morgan 1999; Angrist and Pischke 2009). Note that we also assume that the coefficients of these confounders are constant over time and that we cannot control for confounders that change over time (Winship and Morgan 1999; Angrist and Pischke

2009). Fixed-effects models are “susceptible to attenuation bias from measurement error” which could lead to “small fixed-effect estimates” (Angrist and Pischke 2009, 168). We do not think this is problematic because – in a worst case – we underestimate the change in attitudes. We are interested in the question *whether* vote choice causes attitude change. Lastly, we provide robust standard errors in order to correct for heteroscedasticity and serial correlation (Angrist and Pischke 2009; Arellano 1987).

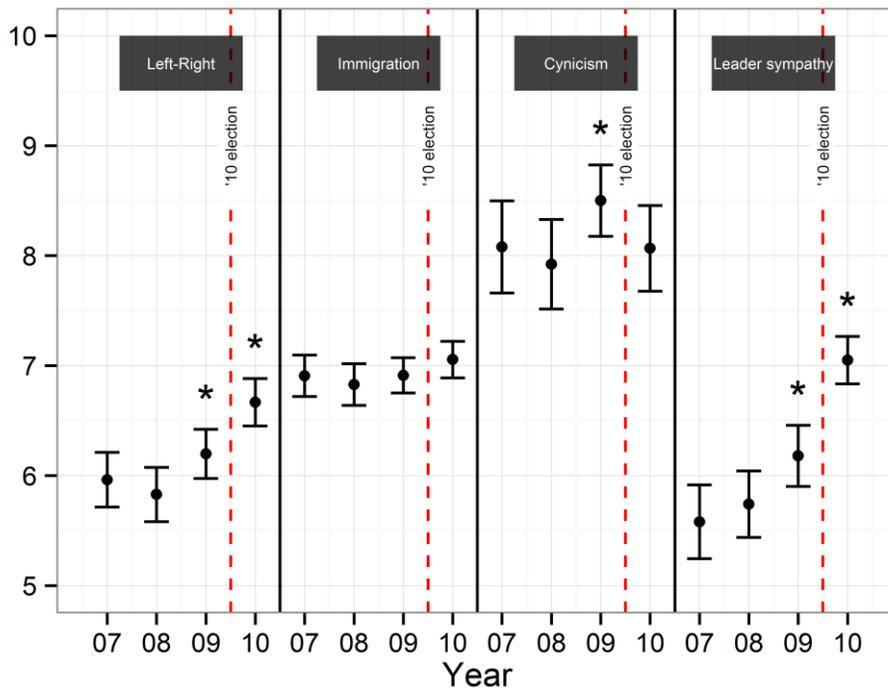
Do citizens change their attitudes after voting for the PVV for the first time?

We analyze whether first-time PVV voters in 2010 change their attitudes after the elections (N = 285). We first do so with simple t-tests of the differences in attitudes after the elections in 2010 and before these elections (2008 and 2009). Figure 1 plots the means of the left-right position, immigration attitude, level of political cynicism and the sympathy for party leader Geert Wilders of first-time PVV voters at four time points (2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010). First-time PVV voters clearly become more right-wing in 2009 and 2010. The difference between 2008 and 2010 is almost a whole point on a ten-point left-right scale. On immigration attitude we see no difference between the time points. Levels of cynicism increase slightly in 2009, but there is no difference between 2007 and 2009 or 2009 and 2010. Leader sympathy develops similar to left-right position. It strongly increases in 2009 and in 2010.

In sum, we see clear changes in *left-right position* and *leader sympathy* after their first-time vote for the PVV. Do note that the changes in left-right placement and leadership sympathy are larger compared to the increase that we would expect if we linearly extrapolate the observed change in left-right self-placement between 2007 and 2009 or the change in

sympathy between 2007 and 2009. Accordingly, this provides a first suggestion that voting for the PVV influences some of the attitude dimensions.

Figure 1. Means and 95% confidence intervals of voters that switched to the PVV in 2010 and stayed loyal in 2011.



* Difference between mean and mean of previous year is significant with $p < 0.05$

The t-tests leave out general developments in the population. Next, we therefore estimated four fixed-effects regression models in order to isolate the effect of switching towards the PVV on changing attitudes (see Table 2). The results show that voters that switch towards the PVV become more right-wing and experience more sympathy for the leader after voting for the PVV compared to all other voters. The change in anti-immigrant attitude is statistically significant but the model fit indices indicate that the model fit is *not* satisfactory. Moreover, we observe that voting for the PVV does not influence political cynicism. The fixed-effect regression – in which stable individual unobserved confounders are subsumed in the fixed-effects (Winship and

Morgan 1999; Angrist and Pischke 2009) – thereby confirm that switching to the PVV indeed *causes* changes in attitudes.

Table 2 Fixed-effects Panel Regression

	Left-right	Immigrants	Cynicism	Sympathy
First-time PVV vote (2010)	0.21* (0.11)	0.06* (0.01)	0.02 (0.15)	0.25* (0.08)
N	7,625	8,605	8,849	8,324
R ²	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.001
F-test	11.53	<i>Ns</i>	<i>Ns</i>	11.66

Fixed effects regression estimates reported with robust standard errors reported in parentheses in order to account for heteroscedasticity and serial correlation (Arellano 1987). * $p < 0.05$

Discussion

Our analyses demonstrate that first-time PRR voters become more right-wing and sympathetic to the leader *after* they have voted for the PRR party. Left-right positions may be “the best predictors of the electoral attractiveness of each of these parties” (van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie 2000, 91), but the congruence between the PRR voter and the PRR party is inflated and likely motivated by political cynicism and / or immigrant attitudes. Our results also align with the finding that leadership evaluations are, at least partly, caused by vote choice (Mullainathan and Washington 2009).

We found no indications that immigration attitude and political cynicism are influenced by vote choice. We believe that this might be the case because anti-immigration and political cynicism represent the most pivotal features of PRR parties – after all, these attitudes make these parties radical right and populist (Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2007) – and these positions also constitute central attitudes for citizens to vote for these parties (Arzheimer 2009; Ivarsflaten

2008). Hence, immigration attitude and political cynicism represent primary issues for both PRR parties and PRR voters. These attitudes are salient and important for them and will therefore not easily be adjusted. However, other attitudes – left-right position and leader sympathy – are more easily adjustable to vote choice.

Are the effects of voting on attitude change limited to PRR voters? On the one hand, one could argue that dissonance reduction is a universal mechanism which occurs irrespective of the ideological leaning of a voter. However, recent studies suggest cognitive dissonance reduction is primarily present among conservative (e.g., right-wing) citizens as they are more likely to reduce experienced insecurity (Nam, Jost, and Van Bavel 2013; Vraga 2015). Accordingly, PRR voters might be among the most likely voters to engage in dissonance reduction. This means that it will be even more important for scholars of PRR parties to acknowledge that some of the attitudes of these voters are actually affected by the act of voting itself.

Our study implies that scholars interested in explaining vote choice for PRR parties should consider that attitudes not only influence vote choice, but also consider that the act of voting for a PRR party also influences citizens' attitudes. By only considering the option that attitudes influence vote choice the literature is likely to overestimate the impact of one particular attitude in predicting PRR voting. Accordingly, scholars should not only focus upon the question whether support for populist parties is the consequence of political cynicism and charisma, or *policy concerns*, such as immigrant attitudes and left-right ideology. Instead, we emphasize that some of the inferior motives *and* policy underlie support for the PRR party, while others are caused by voting for a PRR party.

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