

Voting for the Populist Radical-Right in Austria and Germany: A Comparative Analysis

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1. Introduction

One of the most notable trends in recent European elections has been the rise of populist radical-right parties. This trend gained some momentum, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’, when such parties were able to capitalize on the situation and achieved remarkable electoral victories. For example, at the 2017 German federal election the emergent populist radical-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) secured 12.6 percent of the vote and entered parliament for the first time. In a parallel development, just a few weeks later, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), a political party with a long-standing parliamentary presence, gained 26.0 percent of the vote – one of its strongest performances. Considering the historical legacy of right-wing authoritarianism in both nations and the potential threat that populist radical-right parties may pose to democratic norms and institutions as well as to social cohesion, such developments seem quite worrisome and a close examination of the phenomenon seems therefore warranted.

Previous research has already uncovered a multitude of factors related to the vote for populist radical-right parties. One line of investigation has primarily concentrated on the demand-side, identifying various attitudes that provide fertile grounds for the populist radical-right. Among them, in particular, anti-immigrant sentiments stand out as a factor uniting supporters of radical-right parties (Ivarsflaten 2008; Rooduijn 2018). But also economic pessimism (Sipma/Berning 2021; Steenvoorden/Harteveld 2018) as well as populist attitudes (Akkerman et al. 2014) have been identified as further relevant correlates of voting for the populist radical-right.

Another line of research has emphasized the importance of supply-side factors, such as the response by mainstream parties to the populist challenge. In this context, a debate has arisen concerning the strategic approach that mainstream parties should adopt – whether to opt for a dismissive, adversarial or accommodative strategy (Meguid 2005, 2008). While initial

studies suggested that accommodation could potentially diminish the electoral support of the populist radical-right, more recent research finds little support for this notion (Krause et al. 2023) and warns instead against the related risks of legitimization and normalization, potentially undermining key pillars of liberal democracy in the long-run.

Against the background of this ongoing discourse, Austria and Germany present themselves as compelling cases for a comparative analysis. The Austrian Freedom Party has long been among the most successful populist radical-right parties in Europe and Austrian mainstream parties have at times adopted an accommodative approach towards it (Heinisch/Werner 2021). In contrast, Germany's emerging populist radical-right has so far been treated as a pariah. However, there is growing uncertainty whether a *cordon sanitaire* can be maintained in the future. For German politics and other countries facing the rising success of radical right parties, it therefore seems essential to understand what can be learned from the Austrian experience.

With this in mind, the objective of this chapter is to conduct a systematic comparative analysis of the factors driving electoral support for the populist radical-right in both Austria and Germany. We first investigate to what extent the populist radical-right's support is driven by the same underlying factors in both nations. Subsequently, our analysis shifts to scrutinizing whether the elevated levels of populist radical-right support in Austria can be attributed to demand-side or supply-side factors. Or in other words: Is Austria structurally 'more conservative and reactionary' than Germany, or can the success of the Austrian populist radical-right instead be understood as the result of the normalization of the populist radical-right?

To answer these questions, we focus on the year 2017 as the temporal proximity of the elections in that year provides a suitable circumstance for comparison, holding numerous latent contextual elements constant. Relying on data from Module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES; CSES 2019), embedded in the 2017 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES; Roßteutscher et al. 2019) and the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES; Aichholzer et al. 2019), we compare attitudes typically underlying the support for populist radical-right parties and study the perceptions of party positions. The analysis also involves an assessment of the extent to which attitudes or rather party positions contribute to the observed disparity in support between Austria and Germany. The results show the extent to which demand- and supply-side factors contribute to the vote for the populist radical-right in the two countries, thereby enriching

the ongoing discourse on the normalization of the populist radical-right and the further trajectory of German politics.

2. Determinants of Voting for the Populist Radical-Right: Between Demand and Supply

Populist radical-right parties fuse populism and radical-right ideology, as defined by Mudde (2007). Populism has been conceptualized as a thin ideology built around an imagined antagonism between the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ (Mudde 2004: 543). As a thin ideology it can easily be combined with other ideologies, such as the radical-right’s nativism, an ideology that regards the non-native group as a threat to the vision of a homogeneous nation-state (Mudde 2007). Although the party family is somewhat heterogeneous, populist radical-right parties typically adopt firm stances against immigration (Ennsner 2012). Examples of populist radical-right parties include the French National Rally, the Dutch Party for Freedom, the Austrian Freedom Party, and as a rather recent addition the Alternative for Germany.¹

Previous research has already intensely studied the determinants of voting for the populist radical-right. One strand of this research has been dedicated to exploring demand-side explanations, with a primary objective of identifying the psychological and attitudinal drivers linked to voting for the populist radical-right. Cross-country comparative analyses in this context have identified a consistent commonality among the voters of the populist radical-right, namely, their vehement opposition to immigration (Ivarsflaten 2008; Rooduijn 2018). Their vote based on anti-immigration preferences can to some extent be comprehended as a sincere expression of an ideological preference rather than a mere protest-driven decision (van der Brug et al. 2000). These latent anti-immigration preferences get activated, in particular, when immigration-related news becomes highly salient (Burscher et al. 2015; Boomgaarden/Vliegenhart 2007). During and in the aftermath of the European ‘refugee crisis’ such activation was particularly likely, as the immigration issue attained unprecedented prominence on the media agenda. Consequently, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that voting for the populist radical-right in both Germany and Austria was quite strongly related to the prevailing anti-immigration sentiment:

1 For further examples and rules for classification, see the list compiled by Rooduijn et al. (2019).

H1: Anti-immigration attitudes positively correlate with the likelihood of voting for the populist radical-right.

A second constitutive element of the mindset of the voters of the populist radical-right is economic and societal pessimism. Considerable discourse has revolved around the question of whether supporters of the populist radical-right come predominantly from groups that can be described as the ‘losers’ of globalization (Kriesi et al. 2006), such as the unemployed or unskilled workers. The socio-demographic composition of supporters, however, appears to be quite heterogeneous across countries (Rooduijn 2018) and a recent meta-analysis finds no consistent relationship between objective economic conditions, such as the unemployment rate, and the vote for the populist radical-right (Sipma/Lubbers 2020).

Nevertheless, when shifting the focus away from objective circumstances to subjective perceptions, a more consistent relationship emerges between economic or societal pessimism and the vote for the populist radical-right (Sipma/Berning 2021; Steenvoorden/Harteveld 2018). This may suggest that a ‘sense of crisis’ (Taggart 2004) and societal decline can take root quite independently of tangible economic realities. One reason for this could be amplification of pessimistic sentiments during times of great change by the widespread prevalence of negative news frames (‘t Hart/Tindall 2009; Damstra/Vliegenthart 2018). We therefore expect that subjective economic pessimism was another factor contributing to the vote of the populist radical-right in Austria and Germany in 2017:

H2: Economic pessimism positively correlates with the likelihood of voting for the populist radical-right.

Populist attitudes constitute a third crucial factor, underlying the demand for populist radical-right parties, identified by previous research. Initial studies have focused on the conceptual and measurement aspects of such attitudes, trying to provide an assessment of how populist people are, while also addressing methodological intricacies related to measurement (Akkerman et al. 2014; Hobolt et al. 2016; Geurkink et al. 2019; Hamel-eers/de Vreese 2020; Wuttke et al. 2020; Castanho Silva et al. 2020). A recent assessment of the measurement of populist attitudes by Jungkunz and colleagues (2021) has shown that the predictive power of populist attitudes is most pronounced when these parties are in opposition, which is mostly true within the European context. Yet, the measure works less well in cases where populist parties are in government. Overall, considering the

established correlation between populist attitudes and support for populist parties, in conjunction with the fact that the populist radical-right parties were in opposition roles prior to the 2017 elections in Austria and Germany, we expect that

H3: Populist attitudes positively correlate with the likelihood of voting for the populist radical-right.

When it comes to supply-side factors, past research has in particular focused on the reaction of mainstream parties in response to the populist challenge. According to Meguid's theory of competition between unequal party types (Meguid 2005, 2008), mainstream parties should opt for a 'dismissive' approach towards niche parties as long as issue salience is low to avoid granting undue prominence to issues championed by niche parties. However, if an issue cannot be ignored, mainstream parties are advised to adopt an 'accommodative' approach instead. The rationale behind this tactic is to co-opt the niche party's 'unique selling point' by adopting a similar issue stance, offering voters an alternative choice that possesses superior legislative experience and government efficacy. In line with this theory, mainstream-right parties indeed appear to have responded with an accommodative approach in the face of challenges posed by the populist radical-right, supposedly with the intent of undermining the populist radical-right support (Han 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016; Abou-Chadi/Krause 2018; van Spanje/de Graaf 2018).

Yet, recent research suggests that such an accommodative tactic may not generally yield the intended outcomes. For instance, Krause et al. (2023), studying 70 elections across 13 West European countries, find no evidence that accommodative strategies reduce the support for the radical-right. If anything, these strategies seem to foster further defections to the populist radical-right camp. One possible reason for this is that accommodation inadvertently validates and popularizes the populist radical-right narratives in public discourse and increases the salience of issues that benefit the populist radical-right (Bale 2003; Down/Han 2020; Hjorth/Larsen 2022; Spoon/Klüver 2020, Williams/Hunger 2022; Arzheimer 2009). Previous research has shown that various factors can indeed contribute to the normalization and legitimization of radical-right parties, such their parliamentary presence (Bischof/Wagner 2019; Valentim 2021) as well as the shift in the positions of other parties and the overall discourse (van Spanje 2010; Chua et al. 2023) in reaction to their emergence. Furthermore, additional research suggests that the electoral availability of populist radical-right

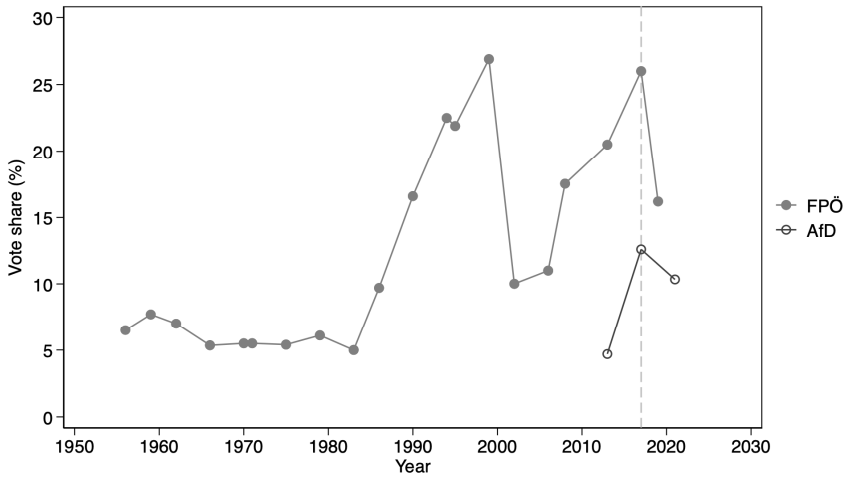
voters is low, due to their deeply entrenched populist attitudes that shield them against persuasion by mainstream parties (Lewandowsky/Wagner 2022). As a result, accommodative tactics might backfire by unintentionally contributing to the normalization and increased salience of the positions of the populist radical-right, resulting in a reduced perception of its radicalism and ideological distance. This heightened sense of proximity could, in turn, foster increased electoral support for populist radical-right parties. Based on these considerations, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H4: The perceived ideological proximity of voters to the populist radical-right positively correlates with the likelihood of voting for the populist radical-right.

3. Comparative Cases: Austria and Germany

Austria and Germany present well-suited comparative cases for applying Mill's method of difference, as they share commonalities in terms of institutional characteristics, history, and culture, but vary quite distinctively with regard to their experiences with the populist radical-right. The Austrian Freedom Party stands out as one of Europe's most established and successful cases of a populist radical-right party. The rise of the FPÖ began with Jörg Haider assuming leadership in 1986, shaping the party's identity as a populist radical-right entity. Due to Haider's utilization of anti-migration and anti-establishment rhetoric, the FPÖ gained significantly in support, culminating in the 1999 election where it captured 26.9 percent of the vote, elevating it to the position of the second-largest party (Figure 1; Luther 2007; Wodak/Pelinka 2002). After the election, a coalition with the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) was formed, causing considerable controversy in Austria and, even more so, in Europe (Müller 2000).

Figure 1: Vote Shares of FPÖ and AfD at General Elections



Note: Based on ParlGov data (Döring et al. 2022).

Subsequently, following internal conflicts, Heinz-Christian Strache assumed the chairmanship in 2005 and steered the party towards renewed success by leveraging anti-immigration and Islamophobic rhetoric (Krzyżanowski 2013). This series of electoral victories culminated in the 2017 election in which the FPÖ gained 26.0 percent of vote (Figure 1). This achievement was to some extent facilitated by the prevailing dissatisfaction with the incumbent grand coalition between the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the Austrian People’s Party, which had built up in the context of the European ‘refugee crisis’ (Bodlos/Plescica 2018). After the election, the FPÖ entered a coalition with the New Austrian People’s Party, led by Sebastian Kurz. This time, the atmosphere in Austria after coalition formation was described as ‘rather relaxed’ (Jenny 2018).

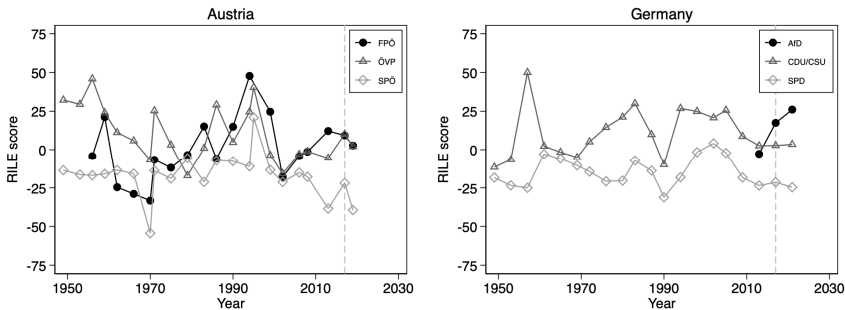
In stark contrast, Germany’s political landscape had long been devoid of a prominent populist radical-right party until the emergence of the Alternative for Germany. The AfD was founded initially in 2013 as a Euro-sceptic party, opposing financial rescue packages for debt-ridden countries in the Eurozone in the aftermath of the global economic and financial crisis (Schmitt-Beck 2014, 2017; Arzheimer 2015). Although the party initially failed to surpass the five percent electoral threshold in the 2013 federal elections, it managed to secure a foothold in the European Parliament in

2014, with 7.1 percent of the vote. Following internal quarrels, the AfD subsequently adopted the ideological profile of a more prototypical populist radical-right party, focusing on immigration, refugees, and the Islam as their new core issues (Schmitt-Beck et al. 2017; Arzheimer/Berning 2019). In the aftermath of the European ‘refugee crisis’ the party secured 12.6 percent of the vote at the 2017 federal elections (Figure 1), entering the national parliament for the first time as the third-strongest party (Poguntke/Kinski 2018; Faas/Klingelhöfer 2019). This was a critical juncture, potentially marking the end of ‘German exceptionalism’, as up until this point, Germany had effectively contained radical-right parties through exclusionary practices such as stigmatization, marginalization, and non-cooperation (Art 2007, 2018; Arzheimer 2019).

Looking at the two countries in comparison, the question arises what Germany – and other countries – can learn from the more long-standing experience with the populist radical-right. German mainstream parties have thus far maintained a *cordon sanitaire* (Arzheimer 2019), since the AfD entered parliament, but recently a discourse has emerged, pondering whether a shift from exclusion to inclusion of the AfD is warranted. Notably, Austria has already amassed experience with the latter approach (Heinisch/Werner 2021), and, hence, lends itself as a suitable case for comparison.

This prompts the question: Why is there such widespread electoral support for the Austrian Freedom Party? In particular, can its success be attributed to demand- or to supply-side factors? Political observers of Austrian politics have often pointed to demand-side explanations, for instance, by referring to the often-cited quote from Thomas Bernhard’s play *Heldenplatz* (1988), according to that the “mentality of the Austrians is like a ‘Punschkröpfen’: Red on the outside, brown on the inside and always a little drunk.” We are, however, not aware of any quantitative empirical study that would have demonstrated an unusual predominance of a ‘structurally more conservative and reactionary mentality’ in Austria compared to other countries.

Figure 2: Left-Right Positions of the Populist-Radical Right and Mainstream Parties



Note: Based on data from the Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al. 2023). Positive values indicate more right-leaning positions, whereas negative values indicate left-leaning positions. In line with the literature and to simplify the visualization, the figure focuses on the positions the major center-right (CDU/CSU, ÖVP) and center-left (SPD, SPÖ) mainstream parties in relation to the populist radical-right, leaving aside the positions of other niche parties, such as green and far-left parties.

It seems equally plausible that the different experiences with the populist radical-right, as described above, alongside the ensuing degree of normalization, underlie the greater success of the Austrian populist radical-right. Particularly noteworthy is the oscillation of the ÖVP between rejecting and adopting strategies employed by the radical-right (Heinisch/Werner 2021: 92). In particular in 2017, the ÖVP positioned itself in close alignment with the FPÖ, in stark contrast to the noticeable gap separating the German mainstream parties from the AfD in that same year (see Figure 2).

Based on these considerations, we derive the following two hypotheses regarding country differences:

- H5: Disparities in voting for the populist radical-right can be accounted for by a higher prevalence of predisposing attitudes in Austria compared to Germany.
- H6: Disparities in voting for the populist radical-right can be accounted for by a greater perceived proximity to the populist radical-right in Austria relative to Germany.

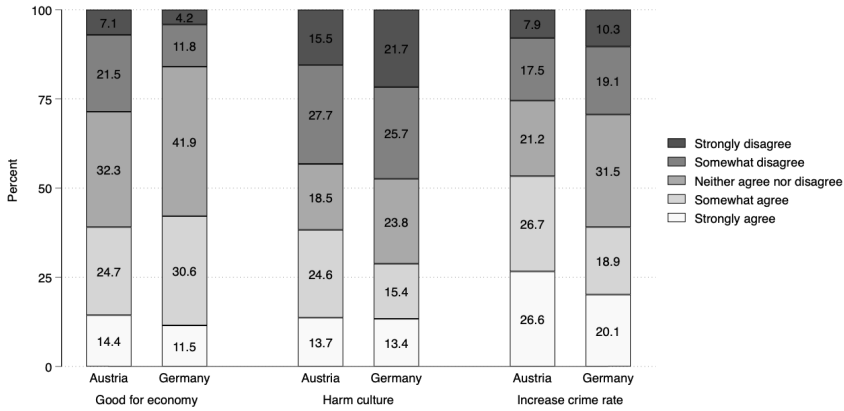
4. Data and Methods

To evaluate our hypotheses, we rely on survey data from the Module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems that was embedded in the Austrian National Election Study and the German Longitudinal Election Study in 2017 (Aichholzer et al. 2019; Roßteutscher et al. 2019; CSES 2019). In both countries, the cross-sectional survey data was collected after the parliamentary elections that were held on September 24, 2017, in Germany, and, only a few weeks later, on October 15, 2017, in Austria. In Austria, a total of 1203 eligible voters were interviewed by telephone, and in Germany 2112 face-to-face interviews were conducted.

The dependent variable in our analysis is party choice at the 2017 elections. We recoded the vote variable to four categories: (1) “populist radical-right party” (FPÖ or AfD), (2) “mainstream-right party” (ÖVP or CDU/CSU), (3) “mainstream-left party” (SPÖ or SPD), (4) “other parties”. As our focus is on choosing between parties, we exclude invalid votes and non-voters as well as non-response and refusals from the analysis. This leaves us with a sample of 1080 cases with valid responses in Austria and 1690 in Germany. In both samples voters of the populist radical-right are slightly underrepresented in the raw data, with a vote share of 9.6 percent in Germany and 20.0 percent in Austria, but we correct for that in descriptive analyses by applying post-stratification weights that adjust sociodemographics and vote shares to match with official statistics and the election results.

Immigration attitudes were assessed through a series of three statements, to which respondents indicated their agreement levels. The statements included: (1) Immigrants contribute positively to [Country]’s economy (reversed item), (2) Immigrants have a detrimental impact on [Country]’s culture, and (3) Immigrants lead to an increase in crime rates within [Country]. Participants rated their responses on a 5-point scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The distribution of these responses is shown in Figure 3 for both countries. Based on these statements, we constructed an index with an acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.78$) by averaging across items. We subsequently transformed the index to a range of 0 to 1. Within this rescaled range, a value of 0 signifies minimal anti-immigration sentiment, while a value of 1 indicates a pronounced level of anti-immigration sentiment.

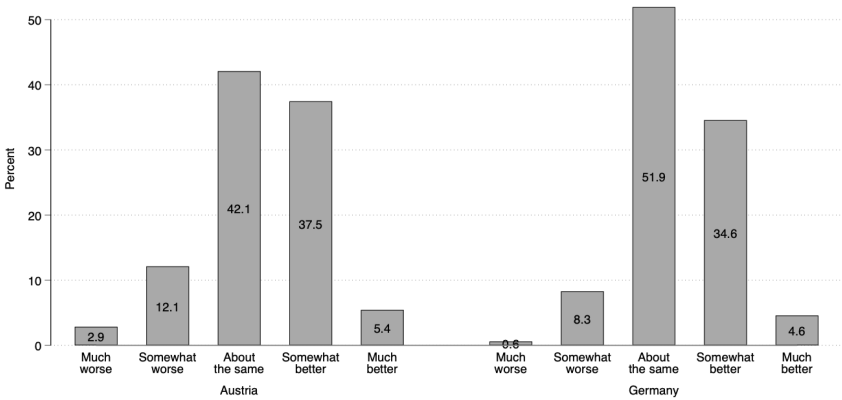
Figure 3: Attitudes toward Immigrants



Note: Weighted data are from CSES Module 5, embedded in the 2017 GLES and AUT-NES post-election surveys (N(AT) = 1026–1075 voters; N(DE) = 1672–1681 voters).

To capture a sense of economic pessimism, we rely on retrospective economic perceptions. Participants' perceptions regarding the state of their respective country's economy were captured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 'gotten much better' to 'gotten much worse'. It is important to note that, when evaluating against objective indicators, both the Austrian and German economy experienced robust growth in 2017, coupled with a decrease in unemployment rates (Statistisches Bundesamt 2018; OENB 2017). Therefore, we consider respondents as pessimistic the more negatively they assessed the economy. Figure 4 displays the distributions of economic perceptions for both countries. For the analysis, we rescale the variable to a 0 to 1 range, with the value 1 indicating the highest level of economic pessimism.

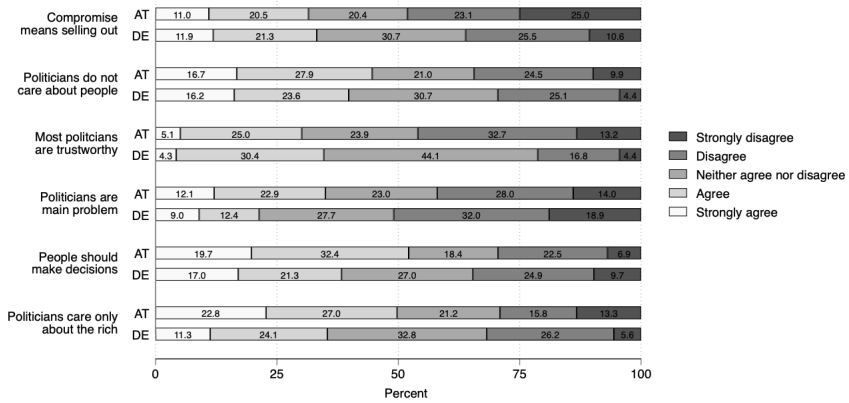
Figure 4: Perceptions of Economic Conditions



Note: Weighted data are from CSES Module 5, embedded in the 2017 GLES and AUTNES post-election surveys (N(AT) = 1037 voters; N(DE) = 1644 voters).

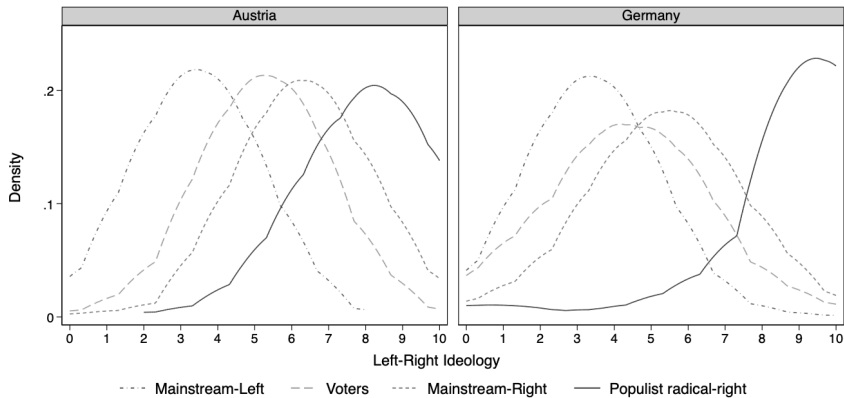
In measuring populist attitudes, we follow the one-dimensional approach and rely on six statements used by previous research (Castanho Silva et al. 2020; Jungkunz et al. 2021): (1) What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles, (2) Most politicians do not care about the people, (3) Most politicians are trustworthy (reversed item), (4) Politicians are the main problem in [Country], (5) The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions, and (6) Most politicians care only about the interests of the rich and powerful. Responses were recorded on a 5-point agree-disagree scale. Figure 5 shows the univariate distributions for the individual items. Based on these items, we again build an index with a good internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$) by averaging across items and rescaling its values to a 0-1 range, with high values indicating high levels of populist sentiment.

Figure 5: Populist Attitudes



Note: Weighted data are from CSES Module 5, embedded in the 2017 GLES and AUTNES post-election surveys (N(AT) = 1022 to 1077 voters; N(DE) = 1612 to 1684 voters).

Figure 6: Perceptions of Party Positions and Self-Placement on the Left-Right Dimension



Note: Weighted data are from CSES Module 5, embedded in the 2017 GLES and AUTNES post-election surveys (N(AT) = 1055 to 1061 voters; N(DE) = 1590 to 1596 voters).

To evaluate the role of supply-side factors, we focus on the perceptions of party positions on the left-right dimensions. Left-right positions were

measured on a 11-point-scale from 0 'left' to 10 'right'. Figure 6 displays the perceived party positions of the mainstream parties, the populist radical-right as well as the voters' positions. We calculate the absolute distance between perceived positions and the voter's own position and rescale them to a 0 to 1 range.

The analysis proceeds in several steps. In the first part, we test the first four of our hypotheses by estimating a multinomial model for each country separately, including simultaneously all of our core predictors as well as a set of standard sociodemographic control variables. The control variables include age (≤ 30 , 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, > 70), gender (male, female), education (low education [no schooling, only compulsory education]; medium education [vocational training]; high education [Abitur/Matura]; very high education [University-level degree]), religious denomination (Catholic, Protestant, Other/None), church attendance (never, once a year, several times a year, once a month, two to three times a month, once a week), union membership (yes, no/don't know), social class (based on the 5-class schema by Oesch (2013): higher-grade service class, lower-grade service class, small business owners, skilled workers, unskilled workers, retirees and other), and regional structure (rural area or village, small or medium-sized town, suburb of a large town or city, large town or city). This allows us to account for the influence of basic sociodemographic factors as well as the protective effect of social cleavages (Marcinkiewicz/Dassonneville 2022; Arzheimer/Carter 2009; Falter 1991). By estimating separate models for each country and comparing the effects across countries, we can evaluate to what extent the determinants of voting for the populist radical-right were equally relevant in both nations.

In the next step, we then aim to assess why the overall level of support for the populist radical-right is higher in Austria than in Germany to test the fifth and sixth hypothesis. For this purpose, we estimate a series of multinomial models including both countries at once as well as a country dummy to account for the gap between countries. We, then, stepwise estimate models including the demand- and supply-side factors and observe to what extent the gap between countries is shrinking when adding the explanatory variables. This allows us to evaluate to what extent the difference between countries can be attributed either to the prevalence of predisposing attitudes or perceptions of party positions. The same control variables as before are included in this analysis, too.

To present the results, we focus on the visualizations of the vote for populist radical-right parties and our core variables, leaving aside the results for

other outcome categories and control variables to reduce complexity. We rely on predicted probabilities and average marginal effects for interpreting the results as recommended in the context of non-linear models (Hanmer/Kalkan 2013).

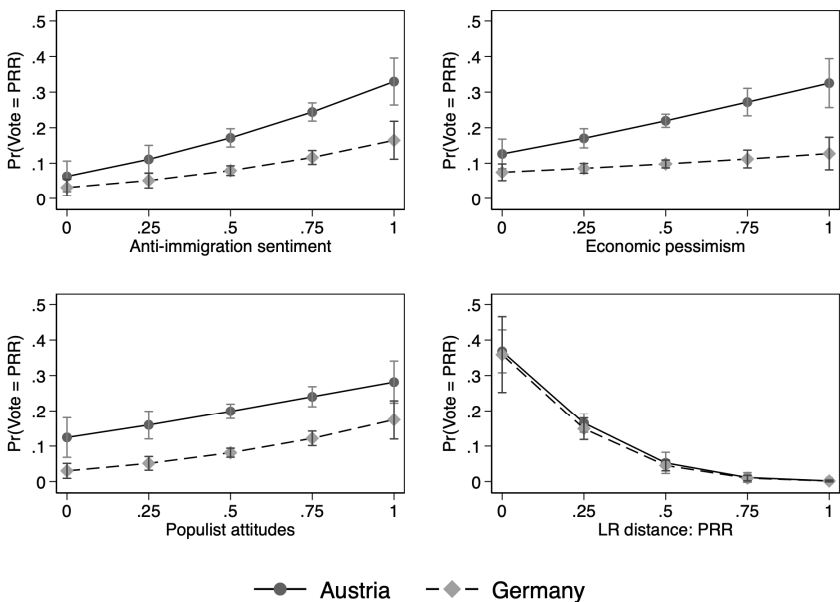
5. Analysis

To evaluate our first four hypotheses, Figure 7 displays the predicted probabilities of populist radical-right voting for each of the four core predictors. We observe that, in line with previous research and hypothesis H1, anti-immigration sentiment consistently predicts voting for the populist radical-right. The effect seems somewhat more pronounced in Austria than in Germany. While at low levels of anti-immigrant sentiment the probability to vote for a populist-radical right party is fairly low in both countries, it reaches up to 33 percent in Austria and only about 16 percent in Germany at the highest level. Overall, anti-immigrant attitudes appear to be a strong predictor of populist radical-right voting in both countries.

Regarding economic pessimism, we also find a relationship in the expected direction, with higher levels of economic pessimism being associated with more populist radical-right voting. This association is, however, stronger in Austria than in Germany, where, in fact, there is only a mild and statistically insignificant trend. Hence, we find only partial support for hypothesis H2, which is to some extent in line with previous research that has uncovered inconsistent patterns with regard to the role of economic factors in voting for the populist radical-right.

Next, we turn to the role of populist attitudes. In line with hypothesis H3 and most of previous research, we find a consistent positive association. High levels of populist attitudes correlate with high levels of support for the populist-radical right. In fact, the slope of the curve is almost identical in the two countries, suggesting that populist attitudes contributed to the electoral success of the populist radical-right equally in both nations. The overall level of support for the populist radical-right was somewhat higher in Austria at all levels of populist sentiment, except the highest level, where the confidence intervals slightly overlap and the propensities to vote for the populist radical-right converge.

Figure 7: Predicted Probabilities of the Vote for FPÖ and AfD



Note: Predicted probabilities of populist radical-right voting based on separate multinomial models for Austria and Germany, including sociodemographic control variables. Data are from CSES Module 5, embedded in the 2017 GLES and AUTNES post-election surveys (N(AT) = 947 voters; N(DE) = 1463 voters; McFadden's R2 (AT) = 0.56; McFadden's R2(DE) = 0.28).

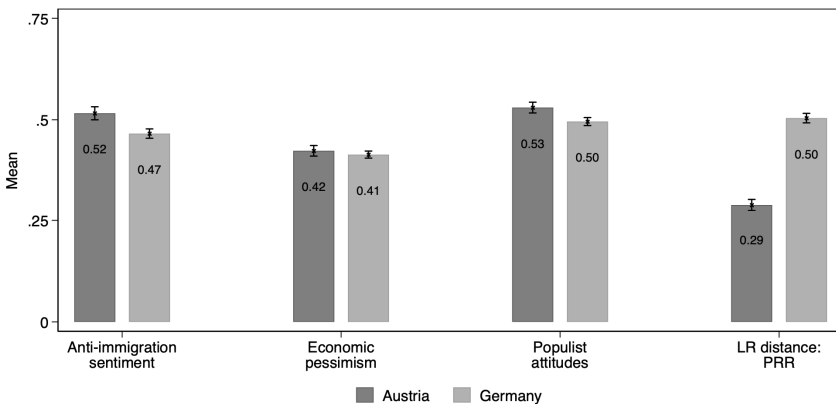
Lastly, we see that greater proximity on the left-right dimension is strongly associated with higher levels of voting for the populist radical-right. Voters who perceive zero distance between themselves and the populist radical-right on the left-right spectrum had a propensity of 36 to 37 percent to vote for the populist radical-right in both countries, making it the strongest predictor among the four determinants of voting that were included in the analysis. Thus, the evidence provides strong support for hypothesis H4.

On the whole, the findings indicate a strong resemblance in the factors influencing voting behavior for the populist radical-right across both nations. In particular, anti-immigrant sentiment, populist attitudes and ideological proximity showed similar effects, while economic pessimism mattered more in Austria than in Germany. Based on these findings, however, it remains unclear why support for the populist radical-right was

overall higher in Austria than in Germany, which is what we will take a closer look at in the following.

To evaluate what could explain the disparities in voting for the populist radical-right between the two countries, we first compare the levels of our core predictors across the two countries. Figure 8 shows a comparative overview of the predictor means. We see that regarding the demand-side factors, there are only minor differences. Austrian voters exhibited only slightly higher anti-immigrant sentiments and somewhat more pronounced populist attitudes compared to their German counterparts, whereas there was no significant difference in the average levels of economic pessimism. A large gap, though, can be observed with regard to the perceived distance to the populist-radical right. German voters expressed a significantly greater sense of distance to the populist radical-right in contrast to Austrian voters. That is a very interesting finding as it suggests that Austrian voters are not ‘structurally more conservative and reactionary’ – at least not much more in comparison to German ones. Instead, we observe differences in perceived ideological distance that could potentially explain the gap between the countries in the level of populist radical-right voting.

Figure 8: Comparison of Predictor Means



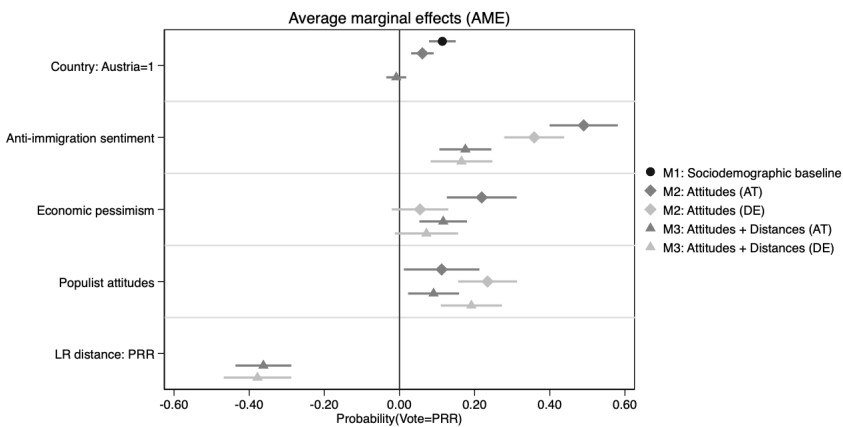
Note: Weighted data are from CSES Module 5, embedded in the 2017 GLES and AUTNES post-election surveys. All variables were re-scaled to a 0 to 1 range. Bars show mean values with 95% confidence intervals (N(AT) = 1029 to 1080 voters; N(DE) = 1582 to 1687 voters).

To assess this possibility and evaluate hypotheses H5 and H6, we estimated a model including both countries at once as well as a country dummy and

interactions of all predictors with that dummy variable. We entered the predictors in a stepwise fashion to observe how the effect of the dummy variable capturing the gap in populist radical-right voting between countries shrinks when adding the explanatory variables. More precisely, we first estimated a baseline model including only sociodemographic controls and the country dummy (plus the interaction terms), before entering the demand-side factors and finally the perceptions of the supply-side. Figure 9 shows the results.

In the sociodemographic baseline model, there is a significant difference in the probability to vote for the populist radical-right between the two countries, with Austria showing a higher propensity, even when controlling for the sociodemographic composition. Upon incorporating the demand-side factors, the gap diminishes to some extent, although confidence intervals still overlap with the baseline estimate. This implies that only a limited portion of the countries' differences can be explained by the distribution and salience of predisposing attitudes, leaving a significant portion unaccounted for. Hence, we find only limited support for hypothesis H5 that disparities in voting for the populist radical-right are tied to a higher prevalence of predisposing attitudes in Austria compared to Germany.

Figure 9: Explaining Country Differences



Note: Average marginal effects on populist radical-right voting based on joint fully interactive multinomial model, including sociodemographic control variables ($N(AT+DE; M1-M3) = 2410$; McFadden's $R^2(M1)=0.18$; McFadden's $R^2(M2)=0.28$; McFadden's $R^2(M3)=0.41$).

When we also take the perceptions of party positions along the left-right spectrum into account, the estimate of the country dummy shrinks effectively to zero and confidence intervals no longer overlap with the baseline. This observation aligns with the normalization thesis, indicating that the variance in populist radical-right voting between the two countries can largely be attributed to the heightened perception of Austrian voters being closer to the populist radical-right. Thus, hypothesis H6 is confirmed.

6. Conclusion

The growing support for the populist radical-right is one of the major trends in recent elections across Europe. Populist radical-right parties were particularly successful in the 2017 elections in Germany and Austria that took place only a few weeks apart in the aftermath of the European ‘refugee crisis’. This temporal coincidence offered an opportunity to study the commonalities and differences in the determinants of populist radical-right voting in the two countries. Based on previous research, we specifically aimed to assess the respective role of demand- vs. supply-side factors, trying to discern lessons that Germany and other countries can learn from Austria’s long-standing experience with the populist radical-right.

The results showed that all of the identified demand-side factors – anti-immigration sentiment, economic pessimism and populist attitudes – mattered, although to a varying degree. While anti-immigration and populist attitudes showed consistent positive associations with the vote for the populist radical-right, the influence of economic pessimism was more pronounced in Austria than in Germany. At the same time, also the perceptions of the supply-side, namely the perceived ideological proximity to the populist radical-right, was strongly associated with such voting behavior. Overall, the analysis suggested that broadly the same underlying factors contributed to the electoral success of the populist radical-right parties in Austria and Germany in 2017.

However, we also investigated why Austrian voters were nevertheless somewhat more likely to vote for the populist-radical right relative to their German counterparts. A comparative analysis of the mean levels of the various determinants of populist radical-right voting showed only slightly heightened levels of anti-immigration sentiment and populist attitudes among Austrian voters, and no significant difference in economic pessimism. This suggests that – contrary to popular belief – the Austrian electorate

is not ‘structurally more conservative and reactionary’ – at least not much more so than the German one.

One striking difference, however, concerns the perceptions of the supply side: Austrian voters deemed the FPÖ less extreme and more aligned with their own views, whereas German voters perceived the AfD as radical and distant. The perceived ideological gap from the populist radical-right was markedly wider in Germany. This peculiar difference in the perceptions of the supply-side explains nearly all of the differences in populist radical-right voting between the two countries, while the differences in demand-side factors could only account for a limited fraction of cross-country variation.

In terms of theoretical implications, the findings confirm the relevance of the core determinants of populist radical-right voting, with anti-immigrant and populist attitudes standing out as the most consistent correlates in our two-country comparison. The nuanced relationship between economic pessimism and populist radical-right support hints at a potential limitation to populist parties’ mobilization potential based on fears of economic decline when the public faces and accurately perceives a robust economy.

Apart from that, we also find indications that perceptions of the supply-side matter. In particular, the two-country comparison illuminates the variability of how populist radical-right parties are perceived, whether as more or less radical entities. Future research should delve deeper into the factors contributing to such perceptions, including the role of their parliamentary presence, the behavior of mainstream parties, and their potential participation in government coalitions. Based on the evidence from the Austrian case, it seems likely that such factors can influence the normalization of the populist radical-right and the extent of perceived radicalism.

However, our own analysis cannot fully answer such questions and is subject to certain constraints that warrant acknowledgment. Most notably, our examination was confined to a single point in time in both countries. While the comparability of these elections was strong, a comprehensive understanding necessitates the tracking of long-term developments in both nations. Moreover, our focus has remained centered on the arguments pertaining to the rivalry between mainstream parties and the populist radical-right. By doing so, we have disregarded the potential for left-authoritarian parties to engage in competition with the populist radical-right, an avenue explored by Wagner et al. (2023), which warrants further attention. In addition, a broader comparative framework incorporating additional countries would enhance our understanding of the normalization process and the dynamics of perceptions of populist radical-right parties. Specifically, it

would be pertinent to disentangle the extent to which various factors – such as electoral achievements, parliamentary representation and the positioning of mainstream parties – play a role in shaping social norms (Dinas et al., 2023), diminishing political stigmatization, and moderating the perceived radicalism of the populist radical-right.

Despite those limitations, we believe that our comparative analysis yields insightful guidance within the context of contemporary German politics, but also for other nations confronted with similar challenges. First, our results shed light on the role of relevant demand-side factors, contributing to the populist radical-right's success. We found that voting for the populist radical-right in Germany was broadly driven by the same factors as in Austria – in particular, anti-immigration and populist sentiment. At the same time, the relatively small impact of economic pessimism in the 2017 context underscores the potential to curtail demand by addressing real and perceived challenges. This could be achieved by building favorable economic and political trajectories and promoting accurate perceptions of these trajectories. Furthermore, strengthening civic education about representative democracy could immunize future generations against populist sentiment over the long haul.

In addition, however, supply-side dynamics will play an even more crucial role in the immediate future. While the FPÖ, with its long-standing parliamentary presence in Austria, has achieved a certain level of normalization, the AfD in Germany, during 2017 and beyond, has so far sustained a perception of greater radicalism (Arzheimer 2019). This is the main difference that sets Germany apart from the Austrian situation. The Austrian Christian Democrats' fluctuation between rejecting and embracing strategies from the radical right (Heinisch/Werner 2021) has so far shown only limited effectiveness in undermining the support of the populist radical-right. This observation aligns with recent cross-country research (Krause et al. 2023), which advises against accommodating approaches due to their potential to yield undesired results and contribute unintentionally to the normalization of radical-right ideology. Given that, a more vigilant and careful response by Germany's mainstream parties to the challenge posed by the populist radical-right seems warranted in order to protect the democratic system from the potential risks of destabilization.

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